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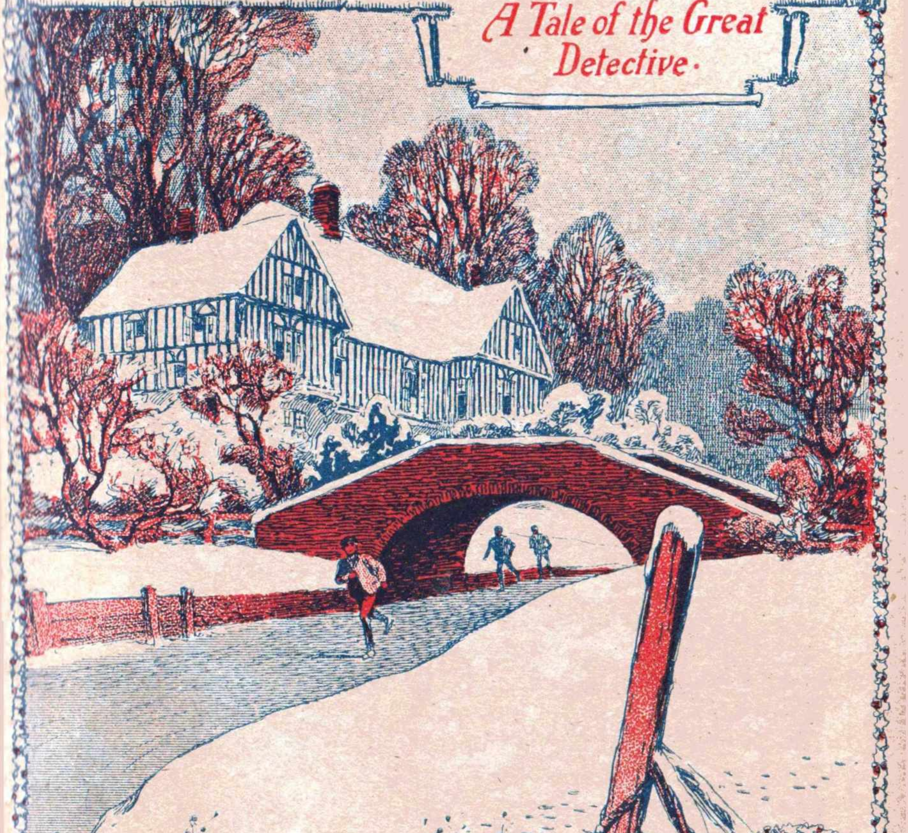
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SEXTON BLAKE'S TRUST.

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CHAPTER 1.

A Terrible Discovery,

THE telephone-bell tinkled in the corner of the room, and Tinker, the young assistant of the celebrated British detective, Sexton Blake, rose a trifle angrily from his desk.

"That's the fourth call in the last ten minutes!" he growled. "Seems to me that everyone gets to know when Mr. Blake is out of town, and starts ringing up just to worry me. Hallo? You there? Well, what's the matter now?"

"Is Mr. Blake at home?" a boyish voice piped along the wire.

"No, he ain't!"

"He's not at home—eh?"

"Haven't I said so?"

"You said he ain't. Ha, ha, ha! But, I say, I want to speak to him particular. I'm Datchford & Blobbs."

"You don't really mean it?" Tinker replied scornfully.

"Yes. And let me know when he returns, will you? When do you expect him back?"

"Ask me another. And don't you try to be funny, or you may get lockjaw!" Tinker replied. "If I had the luck to be near you I'd swipe you across the ear, and——"

"What?" a stentorian voice boomed back.

"Hallo! So you've taken the receiver from the nipper!" Tinker said. "Good job, too! You ought to know better than to send a cheeky youngster like that to the 'phone! Well, who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Datchford, the solicitor of Fleet Street, and I'll report your impertinence to Mr. Blake!" the man replied sternly. "Is he at home? If so, ask him to speak to me."

"He's out of town," Tinker explained. "And if anyone gives me any sauce, I give it back, that's all. So——"

"When do you expect him?"

"Any time now. He went into Somerset yesterday to attend a funeral, and——"

"Not the funeral of Sir Henry Fastow, surely?"

"Yes! How did you know?"

"Oh, no matter! Tell Mr. Blake that I must see him—that an interview is imperative! He knows my name, and he will understand."

The bell rang at the far end, the connection was cut off, and Tinker, with hands in his pockets, walked back towards his desk.

"Datchford! I seem to remember that name," he murmured. "Now, where did I see it? I'd better take a note of this, and—— Ah, here he comes! I know his step."

The door opened, and Sexton Blake, bag in hand, crossed the threshold, and nodded cheerily to the lad.

"Good-morning, Tinker!" he began, as he pulled off his gloves and glanced at a pile of letters awaiting his attention. "I've been travelling all night, and I think I'll have a tub and a change before I get to work. Ah, the usual crowd of letters, I see! Heigho! I wish they'd give me a rest. I'm out of sorts to-day, my lad. I buried a dear old friend yesterday, and I haven't got over the shock of his death yet. By the way, you might wire to Datchford & Blobbs. They were Sir Henry Fastow's solicitors, and Lady Fastow commissioned me to see them."

"Mr. Datchford has just rung you up on the 'phone, sir."

"Indeed! What a strange coincidence!"

"He wanted to be told when you had returned."

"Well, let him know that I'm here, and that I'll call round to see him at any hour convenient to him this afternoon."

Blake went to his bed-room, and Tinker telephoned as directed. When Blake returned to the sitting-room half an hour later Tinker was working at his desk again.

"Have you spoken to Mr. Datchford?" Blake asked.

"Yes, sir. He said he'd take a hansom at once and come round to see you."

"Bless my life! There was no occasion for all that hurry!" Blake replied. "I hope you didn't lead him to suppose that——"

"It was his own wish," Tinker explained. "He seems in no end of a state, sir! He told me to be sure that you didn't go out until he called. And—— Here he comes, sir! Shall I show him up to you?"

"Yes."

A hansom had rattled up to the door, and Tinker hurried downstairs. He returned in a couple of minutes, followed by a stout, elderly gentleman about sixty years of age. The latter was dressed with scrupulous neatness. The topper he held in his gloved hand was new and glossy; his appearance in every respect betokened affluence; his face was ruddy, but a steely light was in his small eyes. He bowed to Blake, who courteously returned his salutation, and then, half turning slowly, after the manner of stout, elderly gentlemen, he glanced for a moment at Tinker.

"This is your young assistant, eh, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I had—er—an interesting conversation with him some time ago. He is a bright lad, with a wit that is sharp and unexpected. I have no doubt you find him very useful. But—er—I have called on a very confidential matter of business, and, if you don't object, I think we can dispense with his assistance."

"You can leave the room, Tinker," Blake suggested. "I'll let you know when you are wanted again."

The man smiled drily as Tinker marched out, and then leisurely drawing off his gloves, he dropped them into his topper.

"My name is Datchford, senior partner in the firm of Datchford & Blobbs, as I suppose you know, Mr. Blake," he began. "We have been solicitors to the late Sir Henry Fastow for many years now, and it came as a great shock to me to hear of his sudden demise."

"I expected to see you at the funeral," Blake replied. "Indeed, for that matter, Lady Fastow was a little surprised that you did not attend. She has given me some directions to convey to you, and I had intended going to see you about them this afternoon. Pray take a seat!"

Datchford sank into the depths of a comfortable armchair, and, with his elbows resting on the sides, he joined his long, tapering fingers together.

"Ah, I was much distressed that I was unable to pay my last respects to my dear old friend Sir Henry," he said, in a penetrating voice. "I had intended doing so, of course, but I was prevented at the last moment by a startling discovery—a very startling discovery, Mr. Blake."

"You surprise me!" Blake replied. "I hope that this discovery does not affect you personally, Mr. Datchford?"

"No—er—that is, it certainly has caused me great pain," Datchford replied solemnly. "Coming at such a time, too, when poor Lady Fastow is in such grief. And——"

Blake stared.

"You don't mean that there is any unpleasantness where she is concerned?" he said. "Sir Henry made a will, didn't he? His death won't decrease her income, will it? I always understood that Sir Henry Fastow was a man of considerable wealth."

Datchford sighed, and rubbed his forehead with a big white hand. The action prevented Blake from seeing the expression of his face.

"Oh, yes, he made a will ten years ago, and as he never altered it, it stands good in Lady Fastow's favour," Datchford replied. "But things have happened since then—most lamentable things, of which I only became aware yesterday; and, in fact, I am not in full possession of the facts yet," Datchford answered. "I am afraid that a big scandal cannot be avoided, Mr. Blake, and it is on this account that I have called on you."

"Pray explain!" Blake requested.

Datchford rested both hands on the arms of his chair, pursed up his lips professionally, and looked over his glasses at Blake.

"You are aware that Sir Henry Fastow was the guardian of the property of a young minor named Robert Benton?" he said.

Blake sat up straight and gazed intently at the solicitor.

"Certainly!" he replied. "Why, I am the guardian of the lad's person!"

"Ah!"

Datchford looked steadily at the great detective. The solicitor's eyes seemed to convey a reflective caution.

"I remember that fact now that you mention it," he said. "Well, this is a sad business, Mr. Blake—very sad. The lad was entitled to the sum of one hundred thousand pounds, and, as far as I have been able to make investigations up to date, the money has gone—nearly every penny of it!"

Blake jumped to his feet. For once in his life he had been lifted out of his masterly self-control.

"The money has gone! You don't mean to convey that Sir Henry was false to his trust!" he cried.

Datchford raised a protesting hand.

"Not in the sense that you seem to think," he replied. "Oh dear no! I bring no charge whatever against Sir Henry's personal honour. Far from that. Such a thing would be unthinkable. But he has been duped—yes, duped! I am afraid that fact cannot be gainsaid."

"Good heavens! This is terrible!" Blake gasped. "I find it hard to believe that you must not be mistaken. How in the world could a man like Sir Henry Fastow be robbed in such fashion? For, of course, as custodian of this money, its loss amounts to that. And, Mr. Datchford, you were Sir Henry's solicitor. He looked to you in matters of this sort. Have you, too, been duped? All this is amazing to me."

"Ah, that is where the whole trouble arose!" Datchford groaned, once again rubbing his forehead with his big white hand. "If only we had been the solicitors engaged in the management of this trust, this could never have happened. But though we were Sir Henry's solicitors, we had nothing to do with this business—nothing whatever. Young Robert Benton is a ward of Chancery, you know."

"Yes. But still——"

"It was for the Court to appoint the solicitor," Datchford explained. "And, as you know, Mr. Blake, there is a professional etiquette in all these matters. As we were acting for Sir Henry in his own business affairs, it was thought best that another solicitor, directly answerable to the Court, should be nominated in connection with the trust money. Such decisions are very usual. Sir Henry, of course, had no objection whatever, and we stayed out of the business. If the money had been invested in England, all would have been well. The Court then would have taken possession of it until the minor came of age. But, as you are aware, it was all sunk many years ago in a big coffee plantation out in South America, and the Court had no direct jurisdiction over the property. Sir Henry Fastow was appointed to look after the lad's interest, and to report to the Court from time to time. That was the best that could be done."

"Yes, I remember," Blake agreed. "There were two other beneficiaries as well as Robert Benton, and they declined to be a party to a sale. Without their consent, the lad's interest could not be realised, nor could the purchase-money be invested in British Government stock. Well, what happened?"

"Stephen Galard, of Chancery Lane, was appointed the solicitor," Datchford continued.

"Yes?"

"He has absconded."

"When did you find that out?"

"Last Monday."

"The day when the death of Sir Henry was notified in the papers," Blake remarked. "Still, what does that prove, Mr. Datchford? Galard may have been in trouble, but how could he have tampered with a South American property?"

"He did tamper with it," Datchford replied; and again his hand went to his forehead, thus hiding his face. "I know that, because Galard wrote out a confession of his guilt and sent it to me. I went to his office, I examined into everything in such time as there was at my disposal, and I satisfied myself most reluctantly that the property exchanged hands over two years ago."

"And you believe that this was the doing of Galard?"

"Most certainly."

"And young Robert Benton has no redress?"

"None whatever. South America is not Britain, you know. Our laws and our jurisdiction don't carry weight out there. The property is gone irretrievably."

"But how could the other beneficiaries sell it without the consent of young Robert Benton?"

"They had that consent in writing?"

"You mean through forgery?"

"Yes."

"And Galard committed that forgery?"

"Yes. He has admitted that."

"Then the lad is penniless?"

"Except for a few thousand pounds invested in British securities, which formed the basis on which the Court of Chancery could accept him as a ward," Datchford explained.

"Then this is still a matter in which the Lord Chancellor can take action?" Blake said.

Again Datchford's hand went to his face.

"Yes. And no doubt he will insist on holding Sir Henry Fastow's property liable for the amount," he replied. "It is a shocking business, Mr. Blake, but it seems to me that the great thing is to avoid a public scandal. Poor Sir Henry is dead! Who would like to rake up anything unpleasant—to bring anything of this nature before the curious gaze of the public? Surely that would be most painful to Lady Fastow. I am thinking solely of her. You know how censorious the world is, and how fond the Press is of retailing anything of a sensational order. I believe that the shock would be most serious to the poor lady. I cannot imagine that she would permit such a scandal to get public. I think that at all costs this matter should be hushed up."

"Even at the expense of Lady Fastow's fortune?" Blake inquired. "By the way, may I ask how her finances stand? She requested me to make that inquiry."

"She will be worth about five thousand a year."

"You mean she would be worth that if she did not decide to pay back this amount to young Robert Benton?"

"Yes."

"But you said just now that the Lord Chancellor will insist on repayment of the money," Blake insisted.

Again Datchford hid his face with apparent carelessness.

"That is quite possible," he said.

"Then your suggestion is that Lady Fastow should go penniless?" Blake demanded sharply.

Datchford moved uncomfortably.

"Not quite!" he replied. "Suppose, for instance, that she should pay half?"

"And who is to pay the other half?" Blake asked.

There was a short pause.

"Why, you, Mr. Blake," Datchford replied, gazing fully at the great detective. "You are not only the guardian of the person of young Robert Benton. You seem to have forgotten that you were also the joint guardian of his property with the late Sir Henry Fastow."

"I am liable!" Blake faltered.

"That is so," Datchford assented softly, as he stretched out his arm and took his hat. "You have my sympathy, Mr. Blake! I condole with you most sincerely!"

CHAPTER 2.

Blake Faces the Lord Chancellor.

"MR. BLAKE! Whatever can have happened, sir?"

Datchford had gone, and Tinker had just re-entered the room. The lad was staring open-mouthed at Blake. The latter's face was pallid, his dark eyes were glittering; supporting himself by one hand resting on the table, he was holding his bank-book in the other.

"I am ruined, Tinker," he said slowly; "unless—unless I can do what seems impossible!"

"Ruined!" Tinker cried. "Bless my life, sir, how could you be ruined?

You can make more money in a week than most men earn in a twelvemonth. Has anyone been robbing you? Even so, what does it matter? You never cared such a lot about money, and yet you were always able to spend plenty on others."

"Ay, that's it!" Blake said sadly. "Not that I'm sorry that from time to time I've been able to give a helping hand to those in distress. Oh, no, far from that. But now my honour is at stake, unless I can plank down a hundred thousand pounds in the next few days!"

Tinker whistled, with a catch in his breath.

"A hundred thousand pounds!" he gasped. Great Scott! Am I dreaming, or am I awake? How could anyone possibly make such a claim as that against you? There must be some mistake! They must take you for some other chap of the same name. There are more Blakes than one in world, you know!"

"But only the one Sexton Blake I ever heard of," Blake smiled slightly, despite his anxiety. "No, Tinker, there is no mistake! I am liable for this money. I am bound in honour to pay it! That is, I owe it most certainly, and as I cannot pay it, my honour will be forfeited!"

"And was it this fellow Datchford who told you so?" Tinker asked wrathfully.

"Yes."

"A precious old humbug I should think from the look of him!" Tinker replied. "He's a bit too fat and shifty for my taste, anyhow. But what did he say, sir, and what do you mean to do?"

"You know the file of papers you keep concerning young Robert Benton?" Blake said. "The accounts and reports from the headmaster of his school, the trades-people's bills for the lad's clothing, and the letters he writes to me from time to time?"

"Yes. I have them all in a pigeon-hole to themselves."

"I am his guardian."

"So you've told me, sir."

"He is heir to a property worth one hundred thousand pounds, and the money is all gone!"

"How?"

"A man called Galard perpetrated the swindle and has absconded."

"Then, of course, you'll go after him, sir, and get the money back?"

"It would not be particularly difficult to capture Galard, I suppose," Blake replied. "But to get the money is quite another thing. You don't fancy that he's carrying it about wherever he goes—eh? You know too much for that, Tinker. Probably it has been split up amongst a crowd of rogues by this time, and is being scattered in riotous living every day. No, my lad! I do not dare to hope ever to get the money back, except possibly a portion of it."

"Still, you will try, sir?"

Blake's features hardened. A dangerous gleam came into his eyes, a great flush swept over his face and neck, the veins on his forehead stood out, his figure grew rigid, he raised his hand and, carried away by an uncontrollable access of indignation and wrath, he banged the table heavily as he answered.

"Ay, Tinker, I will do more than try!" he thundered. "I will work and fight till I drop. From this time on I will devote all the brains and energy I have to exposing the villains who have been guilty of this dastard act. I will toil as I never have done before; I will follow them to the ends of the earth, facing all danger, scorning all hardship, with one purpose only in my mind until such time as I die, or drag them to the tribunal of justice! Not only have they done all they could to ruin my reputation, but they have robbed the orphan, and brought fresh sorrow to the grief-striken widow. I will track them down, and as they have shown no mercy, so they will get none from me, unless they make reparation for all the wrong they have done."

The powerful detective, so tall and muscular and athletic, so strong in face, so powerful in character, so magnificent in resource, in daring, and in genius, looked at this moment like the very incarnation of avenging justice. Tinker had seen him in many moods, and in many different circumstances; the lad had faced peril by his side, and had endured hardship and risked life in his company; he had known Blake when hard pressed, when baffled and harried; he had roamed the wilds with him, and had dived into the great purlieus of the world's cities, and had crossed the seas, and been in his company for weeks at a time on various occasions; he had seen him in all moods, and had admired him in all; but never had Blake seemed so grand a hero, as at this moment when he let his feelings get the mastery. Tinker crossed to his side and laid a hand on his arm.

"And I can go with you, sir?" he urged.

The words, and the timid touch on his coat-sleeve, had a sudden and surprising effect on the world-renowned detective. He looked down at the lad, and as he glanced, all stirring emotions faded from his face, and were succeeded by a kindly sympathy and a deep affection. He patted Tinker on the shoulder.

"Yes, you can come with me," he said. "These scoundrels have brought great trouble on me, my lad, but so far you are spared. Were I to leave you here you would suffer, too."

"What worries you, worries me," Tinker replied huskily. "Say, sir, I'm not one to jaw much, but you know what I mean. I'm fair mad at the present moment, and it ain't on my own account. I'd like to pay 'em out! Not 'arf!"

"I know!" Blake said, as he looked down at the high-spirited and loyal lad. "No need to say more, Tinker! I'm not without a good friend when you are by."

He walked to the desk and placed his bank-book in a drawer. Then he took his tobacco-jar, and began to fill his pipe. When next he spoke his voice was whimsical and almost gay.

"What a world of changes this is—eh?" he said. "Jupiter! Our lives are exciting, anyhow, my lad. We don't get much time for fretting and worrying. All the way up from Somerset this morning I was puzzling over that case of the Tite Street burglary that I said I'd look into, and now I feel as if years have passed since I left Lady Fastow's mansion. Curiously enough, I was talking to some acquaintances in the train about the new Lord Chancellor, and I said I didn't like him. I stated that he gave me the impression of being a cold, pedantic lawyer, a legal quibbler, a man without breadth of judgment or generosity of heart. Heigho! I hope I am wrong! That's all. Throw those matches across the table, there's a good lad."

"Why? What about the Lord Chancellor?" Tinker asked.

"Oh, I have to go and see him, of course," Blake explained. "And I don't look forward with pleasure to the interview."

"You have to tell him about this theft?"

"Yes."

"Great Scott! Wouldn't it be better to fix everything straight again, and then tell him, when the rumpus is over?"

"I can't try that. It is my duty to acquaint him with the facts at the earliest possible moment."

"And when do you mean to call?"

"In the afternoon, when his work in the court is over."

It was a silent meal that Blake and Tinker took together at luncheon-time that day, instead of the merry festivity they usually enjoyed, when all was going well. Shortly afterwards Blake left the house, and hailing a hansom, he drove down to Fleet Street. Passing into the great hall of the Law Courts, he entered the court where the Lord Chancellor was presiding, and taking a seat he looked at the bench and its occupants.

The judges were sitting in all the dignity and stateliness of their high office, in ermine and full-bottomed wigs. Barristers fronting the bench addressed them with the utmost respect, witnesses trembled as they entered the witness-box, the officials of the court glided about noiselessly; even the policemen on duty seemed to be oppressed with a strange sense of their own insignificance in the presence of such authority and grandeur.

But Blake had only eyes for that austere, haughty face in the centre of the other judges. He listened to the voice devoid of feeling, he noticed the cold, grey eyes which showed neither emotion nor pity; he watched the hard mouth, the line-seamed jaws, the strong chin, the massive nostrils, and he knew that yonder was a man who was ruthless, and could be callous in the discharge of what he believed to be his duty. Suddenly the judges stood up. The Court had risen for the day.

Blake touched an usher on the shoulder, and handed him his card. The functionary was hurrying towards the judges, and turned brusquely. But Blake knew the ways of court flunkeys and dealt with this one accordingly.

"You will take that card to the Lord Chancellor at once!" he directed. "And if there is any mistake you will be held responsible."

The man glanced at the card and then turned swiftly at Blake.

"Mr. Sexton Blake, the detective?" he said obsequiously.

"Yes. Hurry, before the Lord Chancellor leaves the building."

The man vanished behind the folds of a heavy curtain, and in a few moments he returned and beckoned to Blake to follow. The great detective stepped on to the bench, crossed through a doorway, walked along a narrow passage, and entered a large room, lined on all sides with calf-bound books full of legal lore. The room was beautifully upholstered; the carpet was heavy and costly, sombre pictures decorated the walls above the book-shelves, a large table was in the centre of the room, the chairs were massive, busts of bye-gone lawyers of imperishable fame stood in the corners; every article gave the indication of wealth, power, and culture.

The Lord Chancellor was there, still as he had appeared in court. His tall frame was drawn to it's full height, his hands were clasping his robes; truly he represented at that moment the dignity of the law. He bowed to Blake, who advanced across the room, and as the door closed softly behind them, both men faced one another.

"Mr. Sexton Blake?" the Lord Chancellor said. "I know well who you are, Mr. Blake, and I have always regarded you as the greatest power in Britain on which the law can rely for the detection of crime. Besides, are you not a barrister, and one of the profession?" And for the first time the ghost of a smile flickered around his lips.

Blake bowed.

"Yes, I am a barrister, my lord," he replied.

"And, pray, why do you wish to see me?" the Lord Chancellor continued.

"Because I am the guardian of one Robert Benton who is a ward of your lordship's," Blake replied.

"And has this lad been misbehaving himself?" the Lord Chancellor inquired. "Surely if that be so, you of all men ought to know how to manage him!"

"I have had nothing but good reports of him since he came under my charge," Blake replied. "Yet, at the same time, I am the bearer of bad tidings. Robert Benton is heir to a property valued at one hundred thousand pounds in South America, and it is about that property I have to speak."

"Why, what about it?" the Lord Chancellor demanded curtly.

"It has been stolen, my lord!"

"Stolen!"

The Lord Chancellor repeated the word sharply, and took a step forward. His face had grown hard. He fixed his cold grey eyes on Blake.

"Pray explain! I do not understand!" he continued, in a metallic voice.

"It is difficult to explain, but I must do my best," Blake replied. "I was appointed guardian of the lad's person, and Sir Henry Fastow and myself were both appointed the guardians of his property. At the time the lad became a minor, your predecessor, my lord, made all the arrangements. He nominated a solicitor named Stephen Galard to act professionally. He asked Sir Henry Fastow to look after the property, and he also asked me to become the second guardian of the property."

"Go on."

"I begged to be excused, explaining that my strenuous life fully occupied all my energies, and took me frequently from home, and often from Great Britain. I explained that much might happen at any time in my absence, and that in any case my mind did not run on business matters. It was explained to me that my position would be only nominal, and at your predecessor's second request I complied. He said that, of course, a man of Sir Henry Fastow's great business experience would have no difficulty in dealing with the lad's affairs."

"And Sir Henry Fastow has died recently," the Lord Chancellor said.

"Yes, my lord. And a few hours ago, Mr. Datchford, of the firm of Datchford & Blobbs, solicitors, called on me and told me that Stephen Galard had absconded, and that by means of forgery the estate in South America had passed into other hands a couple of years ago."

The Lord Chancellor's face grew dark.

"I now am beginning to see why you have thought it well to explain at such length that your share in the duty of guarding this property was only to be nominal!" he said derisively.

Blake gazed coldly at the great judge.

"You are mistaken," he said quietly. "I always understood that a case should be fully explained before judgment is pronounced. I have no wish to shirk my responsibilities. I have come to see you to-day. Firstly, because it is but proper that you should be informed of this disaster at the earliest possible opportunity; and secondly, because I am a barrister and, as such, an officer of the court."

"Oh! I am glad you do not intend to shirk your responsibilities, heavy though they be," the Lord Chancellor replied. "You must find the amount, and lodge it in Court forthwith. Meantime, when the state of affairs is laid officially before me, I will take action as regards this scoundrel Galard, I can promise you. And as you know, the fact that Sir Henry Fastow is dead, does not relieve his property of the liability. It is a most disgraceful thing that any man should so neglect his duty."

"Sir Henry Fastow is dead, and had you but known him as I have done, you would not judge him harshly," Blake replied. "He was a warm-hearted, earnest——"

"That's enough!" the Lord Chancellor interjected. "May I ask how soon this money can be refunded?"

"I cannot refund it," Blake replied. "In time I will be able to do so by instalments, and your lordship may rest assured that not only for the sake of my own honour, but also for the regard I feel for Robert Benton——"

"Pooh, sir! Nice way you have shown your regard for the lad!" the Lord Chancellor cut in contemptuously. "Let us have done with this nonsense. You say you cannot repay this money that has been lost through your gross dereliction of duty. Then, sir, I'll judge for myself on that score. I'll examine into your affairs. You are a man who can make a large income; in fact, an immense income. I know that—all the world knows that. And yet you would have me to believe that you are not a mark for money. I've had enough of this. I will remove Robert Benton from your custody. I will place him in other hands. How do I know that he is safe under your guardianship!"

"Sir!" Blake thundered.

"Ay, I mean what I say," the Lord Chancellor continued. "How do I know that the lad himself is safe? I have never in my life heard such a tale as this. And——"

"Your words are an insult!" Blake retorted.

"Silence!"

"I won't be silent! I won't stand quiet and listen to such an imputation from you or any other man!" Blake cried hotly. "You are exceeding the prerogative of your high office, my lord, and I demand fair play and consideration. And——"

The door opened and the usher walked in, carrying a telegram on a silver salver. The high words ceased on the moment in presence of the flunkey. The Lord Chancellor's face became impassive; he plucked the telegram off the salver, opened the envelope and glanced at the pink form. Then he positively glared at Blake, and spoke in a voice that trembled with passion.

"Read that, sir, and you will find that my words are true!" he thundered. "This is a wire to say that Robert Benton was attacked yesterday. The lad has been overpowered and kidnapped!"

CHAPTER 3.

A Master Stroke!

BLAKE took the telegram and glanced at it. His brain was in a whirl. The anger which had swept over him by reason of the Lord Chancellor's harsh speech died away. For a moment he felt overwhelmed, but only for a moment. The bitter, metallic voice of the great judge brought the blood surging to his heart again.

"There is a great deal that is suspicious in this case," the Lord Chancellor said.

Blake looked at him, and the Lord Chancellor was cynically smiling. It was obvious what he hinted.

"Do you mean that remark to apply to me?" Blake demanded.

The judge did not deign to reply. He looked at Blake for several seconds; then he turned and laid his wig upon the table. Blake now was trembling with indignation. He read the telegram again, thought for a few seconds, and then sighed heavily. The Lord Chancellor turned and glanced at him, and was much surprised to see that Blake's face had grown cold and inscrutable. Had Tinker been there he would have been delighted. He knew every expression on Blake's face and what each meant.

He would have known that the great detective had thought out a masterstroke. For Blake could always rise to great heights; the more desperate the situation, the more deadly was his defence. Danger was but the flint on which he sharpened his genius. The sigh he gave at this moment was a sigh of intense relief.

"There is the telegram, my lord," he said gravely, laying it on the table. "With your permission I will now retire."

"Stay!" the Lord Chancellor demanded. "What do you mean to do?"

"To await your lordship's decision."

"And this lad? What steps do you mean to take for his recovery?"

"None!"

The monosyllable came cold, almost defiant.

The Lord Chancellor stared in amazement.

"Have I heard you aright?" he inquired. "Do you mean to say that you intend to let this lad, whose guardian you are, be kidnapped, and perhaps treated brutally, without attempting to find and save him? Sir——"

"That is your business, my lord, and you have Scotland Yard at your back," Blake explained. "It is not the duty of a guardian to hunt all over the country for a missing ward. It is your duty to set the police to work, and I wish you joy of the result. I obeyed your directions in sending the lad to Halsford College, and the headmaster is responsible for him during term. I only look after Robert Benton during his holidays. I am in no way answerable for what has happened; you cannot hold me liable. But I may tell you this—the police will never find him!"

"You will not look for him?" the Lord Chancellor thundered.

"Not at your bidding!" Blake retorted. "Sir, you seem to forget that only a few moments have passed since you spoke to me in a way that was unworthy of your high office, and grossly unjust to me. I would have you to remember that I am an honourable man. I have listened quietly so far, but only with a great exercise of self-control; now there is something that I would say. Neither the late Sir Henry Fastow nor myself can be held legally responsible for the property that has been stolen. Think over that statement, and I believe you will agree, or, at least, you will admit, that the point is bristling with legal technicalities. We never got control of the money, for that was impossible, as you know. We could not therefore be held liable for what we did not take charge of. We said we would do our best to keep an eye on this property in South America, which, I would have you to remember, never came under your jurisdiction. Ay! Please to bear that in mind. You have no jurisdiction over the property; you can, therefore, do nothing now that it is lost."

"And you disclaim all moral obligation?"

"No; far from that. But as you have questioned my honour, I must decline to enter into discussion with you upon that point. As Lord Chancellor you have nothing to do with moral obligations; your business is to administer the law! You can act now as you think best. When this scandal becomes public, as it must before long, and the public cry out for me to take up the case, I will let the world know why I have declined to do so. The British people have a different idea to you, where I am concerned. They will side with me. I know well from past experience of their attitude towards me. There may be a big agitation, and big debates in Parliament. With that I have nothing to do. But once again I tell you that the police will never find Robert Benton, and I desire to add that the villains most certainly will escape with all their booty if the strictest secrecy is not maintained."

The Lord Chancellor looked long and silently out of the window. At last

Blake picked up his hat and walked to the door. His hand was on the knob when the Lord Chancellor spoke again, and this time his voice was less metallic.

"Pray stay here, Mr. Blake!" he said. "I admit that I made a mistake, and I beg to express my regret. I spoke sharply, but my duty is always uppermost in my mind, and my responsibilities are almost too heavy for one man to carry. And I have been overworked for several months, and I am tired—very tired."

He sank heavily into a chair, resting his head on his hand. His face had gone grey, and his eyes were dull now. Blake walked back to the table. The generous-hearted detective was touched by the old man's evident prostration and distress. At that moment he recalled the great services to the State that this brilliant lawyer had rendered during a long life in the service of the Sovereign. Young himself, Blake respected the aged. He put aside his own annoyance with the magnanimity of a truly great nature, and even sought to help the Lord Chancellor out of his predicament by pleasant speech.

"I am sorry that you are upset, my lord, and I fear that this disagreeable interview has contributed to the cause," he said quietly. "For my part, I wish that I could have chosen my words more happily, but your lordship's suspicions hurt me greatly. You put me on my defence. I wish, my lord, that you would not consider that to be necessary."

"Mr. Blake, I was—er—just thinking how I could explain," the Lord Chancellor began hurriedly. "I have been sharp in what I said, and I'm afraid I was not guarded; in fact, I implied what I do not really mean in my cooler moments. I was agitated and exasperated, and I hope you won't dwell any more on what has passed."

"Certainly I won't!" Blake assented. "We will forget all about it with your lordship's permission."

"Ah—er—thanks! And take a seat, Mr. Blake. Yes, and have a cigar. Perhaps between us we will be able to do something to put this sorry business straight."

"I am at your service, my lord," Blake replied.

And he sat down.

Evening had fallen, the lights in the streets were twinkling, and a soft mist had began to churn up mud on the pavements as Tinker, waiting anxiously for Blake's return, heard a hansom rattle up to the door, and saw the athletic frame of his employer and friend once more. Blake opened the hall door swiftly and came up the stairs two steps at a time. A lurking light was in his eyes as he flung the door open and strode into the cosy sitting-room.

"I have had a sharp tussle, my lad!" he said, in something like his old jovial voice. "For a time I thought I was going to lose. But all's well that ends well. I came out better at the end than I had hardly dared to hope."

"The Lord Chancellor didn't cut up so very rough?" Tinker cried.

"Well, he was more than snappish at the start, but—I say, young Robert Benton has been kidnapped!"

"Kidnapped?"

"Yes; last night! I heard that when at the courts, and that, curiously enough, helped me considerably. I haven't time to explain everything now, though. The hansom is at the door, and we must start from here at once. So pack our traps as quick as you can and come along. Meantime, I must despatch some wires and letters, letting folks know that all business must stand over for some time."

Blake pulled off his gloves and sat down at his desk, whilst Tinker hurried from the room. In twenty minutes' time the lad had packed a couple of bags, and was waiting with coats and rugs on his arm. Blake then picked up a handful of letters and telegraph-forms and seized his hat.

"Come along! We'll despatch these and then get on our way," he said. "I'm running down to Halsford to make inquires about Benton, but first I must look up that fellow Datchford. Jump in, Tinker! Stop at the first post-office, jarvey, and then drive on to Fleet Street."

It was close on seven o'clock when the hansom drew up close to the offices of Datchford & Blobbs. Lights were still in the front room. Blake, pushing the door open, entered quickly. A man and a boy were still there, the former brushing his hat preparatory to his departure, whilst the boy was turning the handle of a letter-press.

"Is Mr. Datchford here still?" Blake inquired.

"No, sir; he left some time ago."

"Can you give me his address?"

The lad glanced curiously over his shoulder at Blake, and then at his companion. The action was not lost on the great detective. He recalled it later on, and then understood its significance.

"Mr. Datchford lives at Wandsworth, but I don't know the house," the man replied slowly. "Who shall I say has called?"

"Never mind about that! I want to see him particularly to-night," Blake replied, a trifle sharply. "Do you mean to say that you don't know where Mr. Datchford lives? Do you never communicate with him from here?"

"He's—he's not long in Wandsworth. He only went there the other day!" the clerk mumbled confusedly.

"I've come to him with a message from the Lord Chancellor, and I wouldn't care to be in your shoes if it is delayed in the delivery," Blake said. "Just find out the address at once. Mr. Datchford won't thank you later on if you don't."

"I may be able to get it for you, sir, if you wait a moment," the clerk said hurriedly. "Please take a seat."

Blake declined the offer, and stood stern and wrathful whilst the man slipped out of the office. In five minutes the latter returned.

"Fifty-two, Daniper Street, Wandsworth, is the address, sir," he said. "I managed to get it."

Blake wheeled round, left the office, jumped into the cab again, and directed the jarvey to drive to Wandsworth. On the way down he spoke but little; it had been an eventful day, and as yet he had not had time to grasp the full facts of the case in all their bearings. There was much to analyse and much to piece together. Yes, and there was even more to fathom than he imagined. He was pondering deeply and not altogether successfully. The hansom turned at last into a quiet road of detached houses, each standing in neat grounds, and presently the jarvey drew on the rein. Blake jumped to the pavement, followed by Tinker.

"Thet's the house, guv'ner!" the jarvey said, in a wheezy voice, as he drew his oilskin cape the better around his shoulders. "The number is painted on the fanlight. Ye can see it here—fifty-two."

Blake opened the gate and strode up the path. Lights were shining in every window, and his knock was quickly answered by a trim maid.

"Mr. Datchford at home?" Blake inquired.

"No, sir. He got a wire and he started off unexpected like, and he's gone to——"

"Hannah!" a voice cried, from the dining-room.

The maid looked scared.

"Where's he gone?" Blake inquired

"I don't know, sir! That is, I'm not sure! I'm——"

A stout, elderly woman stepped out into the hall.

"You are asking for Mr. Datchford?" she said.

"Yes. Can you give me his address?" Blake replied.

"So sorry! I really don't know it. He left to-night for Paris, on business!"

Blake and Tinker looked at one another. Suspicion had sprung into the minds of both.

CHAPTER 4

Hot in Pursuit.

BLAKE wheeled round and walked back to the hansom without saying another word. When he and Tinker had taken their seats he spoke to the driver through the trap.

"Drive to Clapham Junction," he directed.

Taking out his note-book he began to write, gazing occasionally out on the drizzling rain, a frown on his massive forehead. When near the station he closed his note-book, placed it in his pocket, and lit a cigar.

"You had better go back to Baker Street and fetch Pedro," he said. "Follow on with him by the next train. We will meet at the inn at Halsford. And we shall find some curious developments when we get there, or I shall be much surprised."

"Right, sir. You don't believe what that woman told us just now, do you, Mr. Blake?"

"I believe that Datchford has gone out of town," Blake replied. "I think also that he wants his address kept secret. Now, my lad, hail the first taximeter that passes this way and get along home. I'll take our traps down. You ought to be in Halsford early in the morning."

A porter was busy taking charge of the bags, and Blake, nodding farewell to Tinker, took his ticket and went up on the platform. The train ran into the junction soon, and entering a first-class carriage Blake settled himself comfortably for the journey.

The night was still wet and murky, and the engine, shrieking as it rocked through the suburbs, dashed at last out into the open country and sped swiftly away. Three hours later on Blake stepped out on to the platform of a small, deserted station and hailed a sleepy porter.

"You can take charge of these things till I send or call for them?" he suggested, indicating the traps.

"Yes, sir. There's a cab outside, sir, if you'd like to use it."

"Thanks! I haven't far to go, and I prefer to walk."

Donning his overcoat, pulling his soft hat well down over his head, and grasping a big stick, Blake passed the barrier and walked down a lonely lane to the outskirts of a small town. The wind was blowing steadily, driving the swirling rain full against his face; the roads were muddy, the tall, gaunt trees were swaying and creaking overhead; it was a typical winter's night, and the fields stretched out flat and uninviting on either hand. When Blake reached the cross roads close to the town, he stopped for some seconds. Then he struck out in a direction at right angles to the town.

After walking for half an hour, he crossed a stile and went along a path leading through the fields. Before long a tall, straggling range of buildings loomed up a quarter of a mile away, and Blake approached them carefully. All the buildings were in darkness, and as he stepped out on to a smooth stretch of lawn Blake stopped once again.

"All the boys are in bed, and the masters, too," he murmured. "Let's see. That's the headmaster's house, these are the class-rooms, and yonder is the set of dormitories. The cricket-field is to the right, and the garden and shrubberies are to the left-hand side. I'll try round that way first."

He crossed the lawn, and jumping a fence he got into a small field, at the end of which were clumps of trees. Passing through these, he dropped into a wood, and, taking a path, he drew from his pocket the small electric lamp he always carried, and began carefully to examine the ground. Winding in and out amongst the trees, he emerged from the wood and entered a shrubbery. He paused and looked back towards the school, then out across the country, and then back at the wood.

"It's an ugly, flat country, and there's no other hiding-place that I can see," he muttered. "I'll make a diligent search here, and if I don't find anything suspicious I'll have to knock up the headmaster and get such information as he can give. But—hallo! Ah! This looks something like it!"

He had come upon a small patch of brushwood and furze, and the undergrowth was beaten down in the centre. Very carefully, moving slowly, picking his way without injuring a twig, the great detective, with energies now all alert and touch as gentle as a woman's, held the lamp well before him, and fingered the shrubs and brushwood as he moved along. Having examined every inch of the circular space, he moved on in a direct line out to the smother grass and went down on his hands and knees.

At last he came upon the object of his quest, and extracting his notebook, he began to make sundry entries. What he was examining was a footprint, distinctly visible in the soft ground.

He noted the shape, the length, width; counted the imprints of big nails, and found that some were missing; took a note to the effect that the sole close to the toes was unusually broad, and that to judge from the impression, one side of the heel was much worn. Then picking his way as daintily as a cat crossing a muddy street, he went up and down, backwards and forwards, until he came to another footprint, as different from the first as two could possibly be. This one interested him if possible even more than the other. The foot was smaller, there were no marks of nails, the impression was more clear cut, every indication went to prove that both sole and heel were in excellent condition.

Blake spent fully five minutes examining it and taking notes before he jumped to his feet. And now his step became less careless. He tramped out on to the grass and looked round.

Behind him the buildings of the college stood up bleak and grim in the darkness; to the left was the town of Halsford, nestling amongst trees; to the right the fields ran out in irregular succession across a flat stretch of country; on ahead was a path running down to a gate. The gate gave out to a road, and on the far side of the road, perhaps a mile distant, was a house or cottage, he could not say which in the darkness. He strode down to the gate, and when there he walked carefully again, keeping to the grass as much as possible, and again he examined the muddy ground, both inside the field and outside on the road.

He found footprints similar to those he had already discovered, and he gave a great gasp as he came upon a third one beyond the gate. This one was small! He took exact measurements again, and then walked along the road towards Halsford. After covering a hundred yards, he turned, passed the gate, and went in the opposite direction. He came to another gate, this one being on the opposite side of the road to the last, and here, after diligent investigation, he came upon a footprint identical with the one with the nails in the boots. He pushed the gate open and stepped into the field. A path bisected it and ran to a stile on the far side.

Buttoning up his coat and tightly gripping his stick, Blake stepped out rapidly. All minute investigations were at an end; what lay ahead was something of a different nature.

He kept to the path, swinging along swiftly, and climbed the stile. The path ran across another field and a third, and then skirted a wood. Blake held on. At a corner of the wood the path branched off, where a larger one, seamed with waggon-ruts, ran towards a gateway on the crest of a slight incline. Blake carefully examined the ground at this spot, and then he headed for the gate. Passing through, he came out on a broad yard, and skirting this he discovered a cottage perched right on the top of the incline.

"This is the place I saw from the college grounds," he murmured. "Now, what am I in for, I wonder? Ah! The cottage looks as if it is closed for the night, and yet smoke is pouring out of yonder chimney. Good country folks have been in bed these last two hours, and——"

He stopped. Was it fancy, or had he heard the click of a horse hoof close at hand? Drawing back into the shadow he listened intently. Then to his surprise the door of the darkened house opened slowly, inch by inch! He could not see inside. He stood and waited.

The seconds seemed to pass like minutes whilst, holding his breath, Blake watched for the next indication of life. The wind moaned through the creaking trees, the shrubs rustled, the gate behind the cottage rattled against the catch, and despite the wind the door of the cottage stood open at an exact angle; it did not move. Somebody was holding it, somebody was lurking in the shadow waiting and watching, too; strange that at that time of night in a lonely cottage far from the haunts of men, there should be such stealth! Three minutes passed thus, and Blake was becoming afraid that he had been detected. Then there was the crack of a whip, the scattering of stones, the clatter of hoofs, the rattling of wheels, and a loud, warning cry:

"Beware!"

The cry came from the right-hand side, and Blake saw a horse and gig galloping past by the side of a hedge. Evidently a road was there, but having come in the other direction towards the cottage, he had not known the fact. The cry had a startling effect. A tall, gaunt man, coatless and bootless, with shaggy beard and long hair, sprang out of the cottage and gazed in startled confusion around. For a couple of seconds he stood thus. Then he sprang into the cottage again and banged the door.

Too late! Blake had seen him and he had seen Blake! But as he dashed back, the athletic detective had jumped from his hiding-place. As the door closed and the man fumbled for the bolt, Blake flung himself against the door. It burst open, carrying the hasp away, and Blake staggered into the cottage, catching the man by the coat-collar as he stumbled past. That grip wrenched the man out of danger from the swirling door, and saved Blake from a heavy fall. He came up sideways against a table, which shunted towards a wall, sending crockery smashing to the floor, and steadying himself he caught the struggling man by both hands. With a powerful twist he turned him on his back, and then he swiftly trailed him out into the cottage porch again.

"I've got you, and you'd better give up this fight!" Blake said sternly. "If you answer my question, and speak the truth, I'll deal lightly with you, but if you try to fool me, I'll have you gaoled to-night!"

The man was clutching on desperately to Blake's arms. His terrified eyes, his ashen face, his shaking beard all looked ghastly in the murky light.

"Lemme go—lemme go!" he gasped.

"Not till you promise to keep quiet," Blake replied. "I want none of your villainous confederates around here!"

"I promise!" the other panted. "You're choking me! Lemme go!"

Blake lifted the man to his feet, shot him, staggering, into the cottage, followed quickly, pulling forth his pocket-lamp as he went, and closing the door, he stood with his back to it. The tiny beam of light sprang forth at the touch of his finger, and the cottage-room stood out with sufficient clearness to save Blake from an unexpected attack.

"Light a lamp or a candle, and be sharp about it!" he commanded, as he bolted the door. "You and I are alone here, I see, and I am more than a match for you. You'd better do as I bid."

The man obeyed. He lurched to the dresser and lit a candle.

"Place it on the table!" Blake directed.

The other carried the candle in a shaking hand and laid it on the table. Then, trembling all over, he looked at Blake, his eyes blinking nervously and his mouth half open. Blake cast a swift glance around, and then dived into a corner. Next moment he had laid a couple of hobnailed boots on the table.

"Those are yours," he said. "Well, now I am going to show you something you think nobody knows." He pulled out his pocket-book. "I found the following marks in a thicket close to Halsford College to-night," he began. "Left foot, twelve and a half inches long; width of sole, four and one-fourth inches; heel half worn away on outer side; three rows of nails; two nails missing in centre row, one in outer row—the third nail from the top." He turned the boot over, and smiled. "That corresponds with this boot," he said. "And I am a detective."

CHAPTER 5.

The First Link.

A LOOK of overwhelming consternation came into the man's eyes as Blake spoke. The tall, gaunt figure seemed to droop; the rough, bearded face went pallid. The startled villain gazed around as if caged.

"You're a detective!" he muttered. "And you know all! Don't be hard on me, mister, and I'll own up—yes, I will!"

"What's your name?" Blake demanded.

"Tod Curling."

"Where do you work?"

"At Halsford College."

"Ah! So that is why you were employed in this plot. You know the ways of the place, and you could seize an opportunity to catch the lad. Do you know that you are liable to several years in gaol for this?"

"'Twas the money!" Curling muttered.

"How much were you paid?"

"Twenty pound."

"In gold or notes?"

"Both."

"Show me the money. If you refuse, I'll haul you to the lock-up!"

Curling wiped his dry lips with the back of a horny hand, and hesitated.

"Ye'll give it back, mister?" he urged. "I ran a big risk, and——"

"I make no promise. Show me the money!"

The man went to a corner of the room, opened a locker, and drew out a canvas bag. Blake emptied the contents of the bag on to the table. There were ten sovereigns and two five-pound notes. One of the notes was clean, and Blake flattened it out. After a swift glance, he entered the number of the note in his pocket-book, and then, leaving the money on the table, he addressed Curling sternly again.

"Now tell me how you came to be mixed up in this business?" he demanded.

The villain lowered his voice, and spoke in a hoarse whisper, gazing over his shoulder occasionally as if the very walls had ears. The action was not lost on Blake.

"A man came to me more than six weeks ago—a pleasant-spoken gent he was—an' he talked promiscuous-like about the neighbourhood, an' the town yonder, an' the college, an' he gev me half-a-crown at parting, an' I thought no more about the matter. He was strolling around here a week later, when I was coming home from work, an', o' course, I wasn't sorry to see him, remembering as how he was free with his cash the time afore. He come in here to this room, and made himself pleasant, and he asked a lot o' questions about the college—all manner o' questions—an' when he was leaving he gave me a half-sovereign—chucked it at me out of a handful of gold, as if it was only a trifle. I was mighty civil, o' course, an' walked with him a part of the way back to Halsford. He asked me a deal about myself, an' he told me a lot about himself, too—how he was the rightful heir to a big property, an' how he had been cheated out of it; an' how he thought a man should get back what was due to him. An' I agreed. He said he'd be round this way afore long again, and, sure enough, he knocked at the door yonder one night, an' came in, as cheery and friendly as you like."

"What was that man's name?"

"I dunno, mister," Curling said earnestly. "He never told me, an' I wasn't lookin' for trouble, an' I never asked him."

"What was he like?"

Curling frowned in an effort to frame a description, and spoke slowly.

"Middlin' tall; fairly strong, but never used to hard graft, I should fancy," he began.

"Dark or fair?"

"Oh, dark."

"What was his age?"

"Oh, he was a young man—leastways, young compared to me. I suppose he was thirty-five or thereabouts."

"Well, go on. What happened next?"

"When he came in that night I'm tellin' you about I was down in my luck, for I hadn't the rent, an' I'd got notice that I'd have to turn out o' this if I didn't pay up; an' he wasn't long here afore he told me that I could make good money if I'd oblige him. I pricked up my ears at that, an' he began to explain. 'Twas simple enough, he said. There was a young gent at the college as was his cousin, an' had no right to the money. He didn't mean to do him any harm—only just to get hold of him and keep him away from his friends until they did the straight thing about the property. He'd been looking around the locality, an' he thought he knew how it could be managed if I helped. He talked on and on, an' at last I agreed."

"Well?"

"That's all. I was to be ready to act when I got word, an' yesterday he came an' told me all was ready."

"What did you do?"

"I knew, o' course, when the young gents go in an' out, an' what is meant each time the bell rings, an' so I lay in wait, an' I got the lad as he was hurrying to the house. 'Twas all done in no time. The other man was with me, an' it was getting dark quickly, an' we had him gagged an' on his back in a jiffy."

"Where did you carry him?"

"Down here."

"And then where did you take him?"

Curling looked earnestly at Blake.

"To the cliffs at Draitsmere," he said. "There's a cave there that few knows of."

"We'll start off there now," Blake said. "Put on your boots, and get your hat. And don't try any tricks on the way, I warn you."

Curling sat down and pulled on and laced his boots. Picking his hat off the peg behind the door, he clapped it over his tangled hair, and picked up a stick.

"You can leave that stick behind," Blake suggested meaningly. "I don't altogether trust you, my friend. And I've got one handy in case I need to use it."

He flung the door open and beckoned to the scoundrel to walk out first. Closing the door, he stepped to Curling's side.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Yonder," Curling muttered, pointing a finger in the direction of a clump of trees fringing the horizon.

"Then step out smart!" Blake directed. "In a few hours more the dawn will be upon us."

They tramped along in silence. Up the hill they went, and down by a winding path into the valley beyond, and through fields and lonely woods, till they came out on to a bleaker landscape. Curling marched on sullenly, and Blake, as he walked along, felt the swift rush of ozone-laden air, and tasted the smack of the sea wind, and knew that they were drawing near to the coast. They passed chalk-pits, and climbed a furze-clad hill, and then suddenly the sea spread out before them. The white-crested waves were lapping the shore in solemn cadence; the restless water was heaving; the moon had arisen as the rain had fallen and the clouds had scurried away, and now dancing points of silver tipped the water with the beauty of a cascade.

Blake looked around. Silence was everywhere.

"Where's the cave?" he said.

Curling pointed down towards the beach, and began the descent. Slipping and stumbling, they reached the pebbly shore, and the man moved off to the left. A jutting pile of rocks stretched out half a mile away, and they plodded on until they had passed them. A promontory stood out a mile farther on, and they passed this, too. Then the bay took a deep curve inland, and Blake stopped and looked up and down.

"How much farther have we to go?" he asked.

"About another mile, mister," Curling replied.

"Then why did you take me this way?" Blake demanded. "We would have covered the distance much quicker had we stayed on the firm foothold overhead."

"This is the best way; I knows it well," Curling muttered as he pressed on.

Blake followed in silence, and after another half-hour's stumbling over the beach, Curling stopped and pointed upwards at the face of the cliff.

"Do ye see that opening yonder?" he inquired. "That's where we hid the lad."

"All right! Climb up!" Blake commanded.

Curling started up a small path, gripping furze-bushes, clinging with tense fingers to projecting rocks, stumbling, blundering, and muttering imprecations as he slipped and rasped his legs and bruised his fingers. Blake went after him, and together they reached a large cavity. Blake walked in, noting the footsteps on the sandy ground as he went, and, turning a corner, he came into a space about twice the size of an average room. There the cave ended, and it was empty.

An iron hook was driven into the wall, and a long rope was joined to the hook. On the ground was a rough piece of carpet. Blake's face grew stern. He examined the ground, and then looked up at Curling, who was standing near.

"The lad has been here, as you said, and he has been taken away," he began. "Do you know where he has been carried to?"

"No."

Blake pulled the carpet off the ground, and, with a gasp of surprise, he stooped down and picked up an envelope that had been concealed underneath. The envelope was addressed to Robert Benton, at Halsford College, and there was also writing in pencil across the address. Blake glanced at the envelope, and when next he looked at Curling he saw that the villain was struggling to hide his alarm.

"You lied to me just now!" Blake said sternly. "You are keeping back something!"

"No, mister. I tell ye——"

"That's enough! I know you are trying to fool me. One question, though: Who was that man who was in the gig outside your cottage, and who drove away after shouting to you to beware?"

"I dunno."

"You would have me believe that? I tell you that you are making the mistake of your life in siding with these villains when I am on your track!" Blake said curtly. "I will hound them down in spite of you! Now leave the cave."

Curling sulkily strode away, and when they stood on the edge Blake looked both down at the beach and up towards the crest of the cliff. A broken twig a couple of feet above his head arrested his attention, and forthwith he began hurriedly to scale the cliff. Looking back when he had climbed thirty feet or so, he saw that Curling was following him. The scoundrel's face was sullen and evil; despite the difficulty of the climb, he was persisting doggedly. Blake hurried on the faster. He was still twenty feet from the top, when Curling gave a shout. It was answered by someone above. Blake slipped a good-sized stone into his pocket, and pressed on the faster.

He heard a smothered cry above, and gazing upwards, he saw the stout and cloaked figure of a man. The scoundrel rolled a rock, and sent it toppling over the precipice. It missed Blake by a foot, and a yell beneath told him that Curling had been struck. Blake drew the stone from his pocket, and clinging on to a bush with his left hand, he flung the stone with a true aim. It hit the villain above on the chest, and he staggered out of sight. Blake pressed on with feverish haste, risking his life every second in his speed. At last he reached the top; at last he dragged himself on to the level ground and jumped to his feet. A hundred yards away were a horse and gig, and the stout man was running towards them.

Blake started in pursuit. But the other was close to the trap. As Blake sped over the ground, the villain climbed with surprising celerity to the seat and picked up the reins and whip. Lashing the cob till the startled animal broke into a mad gallop, he rattled away, and Blake raced after him, hoping that some accident might stop the villain's escape.

But such was not to be. And at last, panting and exhausted, Blake stopped. He knew that pursuit was hopeless—for the time.

CHAPTER 6.

Fresh News of Robert Benton.

TINKER caught the midnight train from Waterloo, and having placed the magnificent bloodhound Pedro in the guard's van, he settled himself comfortably in his carriage, and laid down to sleep. The train was a slow one, stopping at almost every station, and the lad was still sound asleep when the guard tapped him on the shoulder and told him they had arrived at Halsford. Jumping to his feet, Tinker quickly stepped on to the platform, where Pedro welcomed his presence with a joyful bay, and, tipping the guard, the lad watched the train rumbling away, before he left the station and walked down the incline that Blake had traversed some hours before.

He got on the road and walked towards Halsford. Dawn had broken, the greyness of early morning was fading away, and the rain had ceased. He strolled on with Pedro at his heels, enjoying the freshness of the air and the great peace after the noise and bustle of London, when suddenly he heard the thud of horse-hoofs afar off, coming nearer every moment.

"Great Scott!" he murmured. "That's a horse running away, for a dead cert. He's been scared out of his life. It ain't possible that anyone could be driving so furiously at this time of the morning. And——"

He bent down and seized Pedro by the collar. Next moment a grey cob swung round the corner, swerved as he caught sight of Tinker, and nearly flung a stout man out of a yellow trap behind. The left wheel of the gig went up on a pile of stones, the man clutched the reins for support, the gig righted itself, and the horse dashed on at a hard gallop. Pedro growled, and Tinker stared shrewdly and indignantly after the trap.

"The horse ain't running away!" he muttered. "That fellow, muffled up so that a chap can't see his face, is driving him in that break-neck fashion on purpose. Rum game that! It needs a bit o' explaining. And—yes, by Jupiter! Mr. Blake has been down here for some hours past. Now, I just do wonder whether it ain't possible that the boss has livened up things pretty considerable. It don't take him long to scare a gang of ruffians once he makes up his mind."

He quickened his pace, thinking hard as he strode along. Tinker was never a lad to loiter or hesitate if he thought that work was to be done. Trained in resource and self-reliance by Blake, he was accustomed at all times to arrive at a quick decision and to act when necessary on his own responsibility. And, certainly, the fact that a man should be driving at that early hour along a lonely country road, muffled so that he was quite unrecognisable, and at a speed as if he was being hotly pursued, was a remarkable fact to say the least. Tinker soon came to a conclusion, and forthwith he broke into a run.

"I'll go after him," he murmured. "I can't do any harm by that, and I may discover something useful. If Mr. Blake ain't at the hotel when I get to Halsford, I'll get a bike and start off like a shot."

The town was less than a mile from the station, and Tinker, with the friendly aid of a hostler, whom he tipped liberally, was soon speeding back the way he had come. He passed through several villages on the way, and ascertained from several labourers going to their work that they too had seen the grey cob and the yellow gig, and had been surprised at the speed at which they were travelling. The road he was taking was a main one running to Dover, and he got there within an hour from his start. Some instinct urged him to go first to the pier, and as he reached there he saw the horse and gig, and a tug which had just cast off her moorings and was putting out to sea.

A rough-looking man was at the cob's head, and Tinker, jumping off his bicycle, advanced and addressed him.

"Hi, mate, I wanted to speak to the boss!" he began cheerily. "Am I late? Has he gone aboard the tug?"

The man eyed Tinker narrowly, gathered up the reins, and climbed into the gig.

"Find out!" he growled, as he turned the trap round so quickly that Tinker had barely time to save himself and the bicycle. "I ain't goin' to answer any impudent questions!"

He drove off, and Tinker looked at him and at the tug. Then jumping on the bicycle again he set out for Halsford and arrived there just as Blake was entering the hotel.

"Mr. Blake!" Tinker cried.

Blake turned. He seemed travel-stained and tired, and he was walking stiffly. When he saw that Tinker was on a bicycle a puzzled look came into his eyes.

"Have you come down on a bicycle from town? Did you lose the train?" he asked. "And where is Pedro? You have not left him behind, surely?"

"Pedro is in the yard, and I got here some hours ago," Tinker explained. "I got a loan of this bike and went for a run when I found that you were not here. You're looking dead fagged, sir. I suppose you haven't had a wink of sleep. And there's something I'd like to tell you, though there may not be much in it when all is said. And, by the way, I engaged rooms when I heard that you hadn't called at the hotel.

"Yes, I'm very tired," Blake said wearily. "And more worried than tired. Then let us go up to my room and we can talk there. I am completely mystified, my lad, and yet my night's work has not been altogether unsuccessful, either. Heigho! I'm glad to sit down."

They had reached the bed-room, and Blake, sinking down on the bed, mopped his face and flung his hat on to a chair. Tinker's face was grave and sympathetic. Blake was thoroughly exhausted, the lad could see that, and his mind must be very ill at ease, Tinker also knew, for the indomitable detective very rarely showed depression under difficulties.

"You seem to have had no end of a rough time, sir," he said. "Were you able to get any tidings of the young fellow Benton?"

"Yes. I did a fairly neat bit of work at the start, and thus got on to one of the villains who kidnapped the lad," Blake explained. "I made him take me to the place where he had been hidden, and just as I reached there a scoundrel bolted away in a trap. I've been puzzling my brains over that incident ever since. And——"

"A trap!" Tinker interjected. "Was it a yellow gig, and was there a grey cob between the shafts?"

Blake sat up straight.

"Yes! Did you meet him?" he asked quickly.

"I did. He was driving like mad, and passed me on my way here from the station. He was muffled up, I suspected that something was wrong, and I got a loan of the bike and went after him."

"Yes!" Blake urged eagerly.

"I came up with the horse and gig at Dover, and a tug was going out," Tinker continued. "I could get nothing out of the chap minding the horse, so I came back."

"There was a man minding the horse?" Blake asked.

"Yes."

"There was no one with him when I saw him close to the cliffs at Draitsmere," Blake continued. "You've done a good morning's work, Tinker; you've shown great judgment and intelligence. I was most anxious to know where that man had gone to. But still, I feel hopelessly baffled. Oh, dear; this case is terribly complicated!"

Tinker's face had flushed with pleasure as Blake complimented him. Now Blake had arisen and was marching up and down the room. He was strangely restless and disconcerted.

"What's the difficulty, sir?" Tinker asked timidly.

"The difficulty!" Blake repeated. "Bless my life! I don't know what to think or what to do. See here!" And he stopped and began to state the case to his young assistant in a strangely tense voice. "Benton was kidnapped and taken to the cliffs. When I got there the lad was gone. I saw a man running towards the gig. The lad was nowhere about. That man jumped into the gig and drove away at a furious pace. Where was the lad, and why was that man muffled up, and why did he act in this extraordinary fashion?"

Tinker whistled softly.

"I'd seen that fellow already last night," Blake went on. "The villain I got hold of knew him, though he pretended he didn't."

"And who was the chap you got hold of?" Tinker asked.

"A man called Curling who works at Halsford College and lives in a cottage close by there. As I've told you, he took me to the cliffs. When scaling them the scoundrel, who subsequently drove away, toppled a rock over the cliff at me in the hope of checking me in my pursuit. That rock struck Curling. When I returned to the cliff, after trying in vain to overtake the trap, Curling had gone. He must have been helped away. Therefore, there was some other man interested in the disappearance of young Benton. Mark that! Now what can it all mean?"

"I give it up straight off," Tinker replied.

"If all these men were friends, why should they not have acted together?" Blake went on. "And who took young Benton out of the cave? Was it the man in the gig, or was it the man who had helped Curling away after he was wounded? I went back to Curling's cottage and he wasn't there. Now you see the straits that I am in. If Robert Benton is aboard the tug, I'd go after him, of course. But how am I to know? And if he is hidden still somewhere in this neighbourhood, why then, if I follow up the tug, I will only be going the farther from him."

"Then you don't think that all these villains are friends? They may be working against each other?" Tinker suggested.

"That would help to explain what I don't understand," Blake replied. "And another thing, Tinker. I seemed to recognise that man in the trap, though I couldn't see his face. His figure reminded me of some one."

"And the same idea occurred to me!" the lad agreed excitedly. "Who do you think he could be?"

"I can't guess. Anyhow, we must have some breakfast and then get on to Halsford College," Blake replied. "I must see the headmaster, though I'm afraid I won't learn much of any use from him. Order breakfast; I'll be down in twenty minutes' time."

The college bell was ringing and the scholars were trooping from the playing-fields to the study hall, as Blake and Tinker arrived at the headmaster's house and knocked at the door. Blake handed in his card, they were conducted to an imposing library, and Tinker grinned as he sat down and looked around the room.

"So this is where the head boss lectures the young fellows and whacks 'em occasionally," he remarked. "All the same, they've got a fairly decent time, sir, taking one thing with another, from all I've ever read; but I don't know that they're to be envied altogether. There's too much fuss made about them, I fancy. Leastways, I got my education in a different sort of school from this, picking up a living as best I could and fighting my own corner when I wasn't half the age of some of 'em, and I don't know that they're better able to look after themselves than I am, when all's said. Heigho! It must be nice though to have a good bed and your meals reg'lar when you're a nipper, and an odd whacking don't hurt anyone. It ain't worse than a black eye, and there's plenty of them to be had without the asking down Poplar way."

The door opened, and a tall, severe-looking man, with a grey beard and shaggy eyebrows, and wearing an academic robe, walked gravely into the room. He fixed a pair of questioning eyes on Tinker, and the lad stumbled to his feet and thanked his stars that he was not under his charge.

"Mr. Blake?" the gentleman inquired, in a voice bereft of all human feeling.

"Yes. And you are Mr. Walstend, the headmaster of this college?" Blake inquired.

"Quite so. You have called, no doubt, about this unfortunate incident concerning Robert Benton."

"You may well say that it is unfortunate," Blake replied, a trifle sharply. "It is a most serious matter, Mr. Walstend, both for the boy and for me. And I am afraid that if the fact that one of your pupils was kidnapped gets into the papers, it will not be to your advantage, either."

Walstend blinked.

"I cannot be held responsible for a thing like that, and I don't believe that the Lord Chancellor blames me," Walstend replied, and he smiled a trifle irritatingly. "It seems to me, Mr. Blake, that he considers that it is you who are deserving of censure."

"Indeed! And may I ask why you are of that opinion?" Blake demanded.

Walstend took a telegram from his pocket.

"Read that. It explains my reason," he said.

Blake opened the telegram, and read as follows:

"Wire just received from young Robert Benton stating that he had been rescued and has crossed to the Continent to escape from his enemies. Have tried to communicate with Sexton Blake, but he cannot be found. If you know his whereabouts, tell him to report himself to me at once."

Blake read the telegram aloud, and then gazed at Tinker.

"Young Benton has wired to the Lord Chancellor!" he cried. "This is surprising news, Tinker. What a lucky thing it is that we came here. Mr. Walstend, I won't detain you any longer. I'll start at once."

"You're going to see the Lord Chancellor," Walstend said.

"Nothing of the kind. I'm in too great a hurry."

"What? You won't obey his commands!" Walstend gasped. "When he hears that you have been here and that I delivered his message, and that you have wilfully ignored his authority——"

"When he hears that he'll blame you," Blake interjected curtly. "He'll think that you have blundered again, and I don't envy you the quarter of an hour you will have with him before long. Come on, Tinker! We have not a minute to waste."

Blake hurried from the college. For the first time since his interview with Datchford, his face had grown bright and hopeful. He walked lightly and spoke buoyantly, striding along so rapidly that Tinker had difficulty in keeping pace with him. As they got out of the college grounds and took the road back to Halsford, Tinker, amazed at his chief's cheeriness, turned to him in his perplexity.

"You've guessed what happened last night, Mr. Blake?" he suggested breathlessly.

"Rather! Benton was in that trap after all, Tinker!"

"But he must have been under the seat?" Tinker urged.

"Yes, he was! He was hiding there of his own accord."

"Great Scott! Then he got on the tug, too?"

"He did. And we're going after him! He thinks that that stout villain is a friend instead of an enemy. We start at once for Dover, and then we follow them on to the Continent. Get Pedro out and hire a trap. Meantime I'll pay the bill."

CHAPTER 7.

The Monastery in the Snow.

NIGHT was closing in and flakes of snow were falling. For two days Blake and Tinker had been in pursuit of Robert Benton and the man who had lured him away, and they were climbing amongst the mountains and glaciers of Switzerland. They had come through Rouen and Luxemburg, and Stuttgard to Berne, following on the track steadily and persistently, and they knew that so far they had not lost the trail. Now they were near Jungfrau, and their position was sufficiently perilous. To stay out of doors on such an altitude on such a night was to court death, and there was not a house or cabin that they could see for miles around.

Blake, leaning upon his alpenstock, stopped presently, and Tinker laboured up to his side. Pedro followed, nosing the snow.

"Seems to me we're in a tight fix, Tinker!" Blake said. "If that Romanshe down in the plain directed us wrong we'll have to keep going all night, despite the danger of a fall! To try to rest here would be fatal!"

"I didn't like the look of him, but I don't take easily to foreigners," Tinker replied. "He spoke earnestly enough, sir, anyhow. I've been puzzling my head to know, though, if we did right to come this way at all. Where could young Benton and the other chap be making to? Seems to me it's all wilderness up here!"

The snow had begun to fall more heavily; the darkness was becoming oppressive; looking down towards the plain Blake could not discern any outline. Only above the high peaks could he see a distinction in the light.

"Hump! They've come this way whatever the reason may be," he replied. "At the present moment, my lad, I'm more concerned with the question of our safety than with them. You and I are no use here now, Tinker. We must trust to Pedro. Unhitch that rope and join it to mine, so that we can keep together. Pedro, old dog, lead the way! Go on! Go on!"

Tinker unwound a thin, strong rope he had been carrying around his middle, and Pedro raised his head and looked questioningly at Blake. The celebrated detective patted him, pointed up the mountain, and Pedro trotted forward. He disappeared in the darkness for a minute, and then he came back again. Again Blake urged him forward, and as the noble hound moved away Blake and Tinker followed, joined together by the rope.

So they went amidst the falling snow, higher and ever higher. Now Pedro trotted by their side, and they knew that they were on the edge of a glacier.

and that the hound was guarding them. Now he went forward and waited, baying occasionally, now he stopped and nosed the snow and then trotted on again. They were tired and hungry, almost exhausted.

The air had become more rarefied, their clothes were coated with the drift, their feet sank heavily at every step, but on they went desperately. At last Pedro sat down and wagged his tail, his big tongue lolling out of the side of his huge mouth, and his bloodshot eyes blinking up at Blake.

"Go on, Pedro!" Blake sighed.

The hound sprang away, nearly knocking down Tinker as he turned across the path. Blake took a dozen yards and then he gave a shout.

"Level ground, Tinker! Pedro has led us all right. Step out again; our journey is nearly at an end! We'll find some sort of a shanty here, I'm sure."

Tinker grunted in satisfaction; he was too fagged for speech. Blake tramped on, whilst Pedro bounded around them both, then dashed on and came back again. Suddenly Blake stopped.

"What a night!" he said. "Look, my lad! We're under the walls of a big building and we didn't see till now."

"Good job!" Tinker gasped. "Tell you what, sir, I'm a bit out of condition for this sort of game! Tramping the London pavements don't do a chap's muscles a deal of good. I'll be glad of a rest and the sight of a fire! Can you see the door anywhere? I hope the swell as owns this mansion ain't a surly lot!"

Blake laughed.

"Oh, you'll be hospitably received," he replied. "But we must be ready for the unexpected when we get inside, Tinker. If Robert Benton is not here I can't think where he has gone."

Clang! Clang!

As Blake spoke he pulled a bell, which rang sharp and solemn in the silence. The door was a heavy one, beaded with nails, and Tinker jumped as he heard a voice addressing him and Blake without the door being opened.

"Peace, friends! What brings you here?" a voice said.

"We are travellers, and we have lost our way, and we crave your hospitality!" Blake replied.

Tinker stared at the door, and now he noticed that a small shutter had been pulled aside, and that a man was looking out. A sense of relief and an anticipation of comfort crept over him as he heard some bolts being withdrawn, and presently the door was drawn back.

"Enter and welcome!" the man said. "The brothers of St. Bernard will do their best to make you comfortable."

A warm rush of air swept out from the building, and Blake and Tinker stepped inside. Pedro followed and wagged his tail. The man closed the door, took up a lantern, and led the tired travellers along a lengthy hall. The man was clothed in a dark robe, around his middle was a strap, sandals were on his feet, and his hair was cut close. He walked ahead, swinging the lantern, and Blake and Tinker tramped after him. Opening a second door at the end of the hall he entered a room lit by a lamp. Then he bade his guests be seated.

The room was plainly furnished, but it was comfortable. In an open grate at one side a large wood fire was hissing and crackling merrily; there were religious pictures around the walls; the table, the chairs, the sideboard, everything was solid and of good workmanship, and everything was spotlessly clean. The man drew a chair to the fire, and taking Tinker by the arm he gently led him to it.

"Poor boy! He is famished!" he said. "Warm yourself, and I will see that you have food before long. I will get you both a pair of sandals, too. Now, will you give me your names, so that I can acquaint the Prior of your arrival?"

"I am an English detective named Blake, and I have come to this neighbourhood on most important business," the great detective replied. "It might be detrimental to the interests of justice if my presence was made known. I trust, therefore, that you will respect my confidence. And, pray, may I know your name in return?"

The man smiled.

"Though we live out of the world, yet, of course, we are not children," he said, "and I quite see the force of your statement, Mr. Blake. You may rest certain that your name will be kept secret. My name is Brother Stanislaus. My duty in this monastery is to look after the guest-house, where you are at present, so that I will have the pleasure of becoming better acquainted with you as time goes on."

"You are very kind," Blake said sincerely. "I have often heard of the monasteries of St. Bernard, though until now I have never visited one. I know how you work for the poor, how you befriend the helpless; that year in and year out, you rescue travellers from death and give them hospitality; and I know that you do all this from your love of your fellow men, and that you do not look for any reward in return. Brother Stanislaus, my young friend and I are deeply indebted to you, and we both thank you from our hearts!"

The good brother smiled again.

"We have given up the world because we do not care for the attractions that appeal to so many," he replied. "And we are very happy—far happier than most people who enjoy the excitement of great cities, for instance. Ours, though a busy life, is probably one that would not suit you, Mr. Blake, and you out in the world may well be a better man than any of us who live in a monastery. Men's natures are different, and this life in which we find peace and contentment might only make you restless and dissatisfied. Each man knows what is good for himself, and it is folly for any man to judge another by his own feelings. Is not happiness the one thing we all strive for, and would we not be fools if we surrendered it, once we get it within our grip?"

"I quite agree," Blake replied cordially. "And to a large extent you find happiness in doing good?"

The brother nodded.

"Yes. But this is not the time for a long talk," he replied. "Your young friend is falling asleep, and——"

"Oh, I'm all right!" Tinker interjected hastily. "I'm so jolly comfortable, and that fire is warming me so splendidly, that I feel as if I could do a snooze; but don't bother about me."

"And the dog," the brother continued. "What a splendid animal he is! Bigger than any of our great St. Bernards! I must not forget his supper either, poor old chap!" And he bent down and patted Pedro. "Now, Mr. Blake, I will hurry away, and in a few minutes' time I will have some food prepared."

He hurried from the room, and Tinker, stretched before the fire, gave such a sigh of complete happiness that Blake burst out laughing.

"What are you thinking about, my lad?" he asked.

"Grub!" Tinker replied earnestly. "I feel at the present moment that I've got everything else in the world that I want but that. Won't I have a fair tuck in when it comes along, and won't I sleep without dreaming to-night! I say, sir, that's a good-hearted man who opened the door to us! He's a brick, I reckon! It's pleasant, after hunting around after scoundrels, to come across a man who is the right sort, and who is friendly and kindly and straightforward, and——"

He had drawled the last few words. Now he stopped, for he had dropped asleep. Blake threw a couple of logs on the fire, and filled and lit his pipe. He was smoking contentedly when Brother Stanislaus returned, followed by a younger man. Both were carrying large trays. Silently and deftly they laid the table, and Tinker began to stir. Suddenly he sat up straight.

"Cricky! I smell soup!" he gasped. "What-ho! There's a spread an' no mistake!"

Both the brothers burst out laughing.

"Then come to the table whilst the meal is hot," Stanislaus said. "We are going to wait upon you."

CHAPTER 8.

Blake Makes Use of a Disguise.

"AND now, Brother Stanislaus, when can I see the Prior?" Blake asked, as twenty minutes later he and Tinker rose from the table, and the brothers were busy removing the delf.

"He was only waiting until you had your meal," Stanislaus replied. "He will be with you in a few minutes, Mr. Blake."

The brothers left the room, and Tinker looked at Blake.

"You want to see him about Benton, I suppose, sir?" he said.

"Yes."

"They may have left since we came," Tinker suggested uneasily.

Blake smiled.

"I don't trust much to chance, my lad," he explained. "They would have had to come through this room and thus out through the hall to the door. Had I any fear on that score I would not have waited until now."

Blake lit his pipe and puffed contentedly, and presently the door opened and the Prior entered. He was a tall, handsome man, with regular features, dark eyes, strong frame, and a courtly manner, and he was dressed exactly like Brother Stanislaus. One glance was sufficient to show that he was a man of keen intelligence and thought, and as soon as he spoke he gave proof of culture and refinement. Clearly here was one who was fit to command.

"Mr. Blake?" he said, smiling.

"Yes," Blake replied, as he rose and extended his hand.

"Mr. Sexton Blake, I think," the Prior added.

"Ah, you know me!" Blake said.

"We read of what goes on in the world, and I am glad you have paid us a visit," the Prior explained. "But sit down, Mr. Blake. And this lad is—er——"

"My young assistant, Tinker."

"Oh, I've read of him, too!" the Prior laughed, shaking hands cordially with Tinker, and then patting him on the shoulder. "Why, he's quite a public character like you, Mr. Blake, and a very valuable ally, too! Well, I hope they've made you comfortable here. You are to stay just as long as you like, you know, and as I am very busy always and, therefore, may not have time to see you again for some days, perhaps, you would not mind if I asked your advice now on a matter that is giving me serious concern."

"I can hardly imagine how my advice can be of service in a monastery," Blake replied, laughing heartily, "but, certainly, you are welcome to it, now or at any other time. But first let me ask you a question that is rather urgent. I've come to this neighbourhood on important business, and I'd be glad to know if there are any other guests besides ourselves here at present?"

"There are none," the Prior replied.

"None?"

"No. Occasionally we have visitors in a predicament like yours at this time of year—belated travellers who have lost their way. But otherwise the guest-house is empty during the winter. Some have called during the last few days, but they have gone on their way."

"Did a man and a young lad call here?" Blake asked.

The Prior looked surprised.

"They did! They left early this morning," he replied.

"Ah!"

Blake's face had grown keen, and Tinker was leaning forward in his chair, listening intently.

"Do you know them?" the Prior continued.

"I am most anxious to come up with them," Blake explained. "Could you give me their names, and describe their appearance?"

"The gentleman's name was Drayton, and the lad's name was Barrington," the Prior answered.

Blake thought for a few seconds.

"They had luggage with them?" he suggested.

"A couple of bags."

"And their initials were on their luggage?"

"That may be so. Brother Stanislaus could tell you, I dare say. He looked after their comforts. I only saw them for a few minutes."

"They are the couple I am seeking," Blake went on. "I think it only right to explain my interest in them, and I am sure you will respect my confidence. That young lad is a Ward in Chancery in England, and I am his guardian, Prior. The man accompanying him has decoyed him from Britain, and the lad is in serious danger."

"Gracious! And the gentleman had such charming manners, and seemed to have such a regard for the young fellow!" the Prior gasped. "You certainly have given me a shock. And the lad, too, was apparently so happy, and had such confidence in his companion! I find it hard——"

"The lad was kidnapped from the college where he is being educated, and he thinks that his companion is befriending him and is protecting him from his enemies," Blake went on. "In point of fact, this Mr. Drayton is one of the gang who has robbed the boy of his inheritance, and is now anxious to hide him from his friends. You can realise my state of mind. I tracked them all the way to Berne, and then on here. Where can they be making for, do you think?"

The Prior stood up and began to pace the room agitatedly. His ascetic face had grown clouded, his kindly eyes had become stern, a heavy frown had gathered on his forehead. At that moment he looked every inch a fighting-man—one who had chosen a life of peace for its own sake, but who could be stern and courageous, as becomes a man in the face of injustice or danger.

"Mr. Blake, what you have told me is most alarming, even more so than you think at present!" he said, in a tense voice. "If only I had an inkling of all this, that man would not have left the monastery I would have kept him here by force. You ask me where do I think they have gone. I can only tell you that my suspicions are gravely aroused. I do not know for certain, but your statements bring the question up again about which I was anxious to consult you. The neighbourhood around here has become very lawless of late; the peaceful folk around have been threatened, robbed, and assaulted."

"You mean that there is some evil influence in the vicinity?"

"More than that! There is a gang of brigands, who have set the Government at defiance!"

Blake started.

"I see what you fear," he said. "You think that this man Drayton has decoyed the lad here purposely, so that he could hand him over to these brigands?"

"I do. And they are a desperate crowd, I assure you! They have terrorised the pastoral folk, they extort blackmail wherever they go, and they stop at no crime when they are baulked. The poor folk around look to us for advice and protection, and in this matter we are powerless to help them. These brigands live in the mountain fastnesses. They keep continually on the move. They know every inch of the country. The authorities have made desultory and futile efforts to capture them, and feel themselves helpless, I am afraid. The scoundrels have grown bolder with success, and the situation has become positively alarming now that the winter has come upon us."

Blake stood up.

"It is evident to me, then, that this lad has been taken here of set purpose, though what that purpose can be is more than I know," he replied. "Your statements make me all the more determined to effect his release at any risk to myself. Can you tell me where I am likely to find those brigands, and who their leader is?"

"He is said to be an outlaw called Lutzatti, but we don't know anything for certain," the Prior replied. "Anyhow, he is a daring and desperate villain, as he has proved already when hard pressed. I know your ability and courage, Mr. Blake, but it was never my intention to suggest that you should try to deal with these brigands single-handed. Such an attempt could only end in disaster. No. What I hoped was that, with your great experience of criminals, you might be able to suggest some plan on which we could act."

"And, meantime, what about my young ward?" Blake asked. "You forget about him, Prior."

"No. I recognise that if he has been handed over to Lutzatti, then the case is altered; but even so, it would be madness for you to try to effect his release by yourself."

"I have no alternative," Blake replied grimly. "I cannot wait for the authorities to move. Anything might happen to my young ward whilst they were hesitating. And you have said already that you don't place much confidence in their enterprise. Besides, if these bandits are alarmed they may adopt violent measures, in which my ward may be a victim. I must go in amongst them, and drag him out by strategy. It may seem a desperate venture, but it is the only one left to me."

The good Prior had become greatly agitated.

"You will fail—you must fail!" he urged. "You will only lose your life!"

"I must risk that," Blake replied.

The two men looked at one another. Blake's strong, manly face, his splendid physique, the indomitable courage evidenced in his bearing, impressed the man of peace, in whose eyes a kindly light came as he laid a hand on the great detective's shoulder.

"You are a man of your word, and I see that your resolution is taken," he said, "and that nothing that I can say can alter you. Since that is so, I will not urge you any more to refrain. I respect your courage, and I respect the high sense of duty which urges you on. So be it, then. You have come through some hairbreadth escapes in your adventurous career, and perhaps you will succeed once again. But we cannot allow you to take a greater risk than is necessary."

"It would be folly to do so, and I can assure you that I don't scoff at prudence," Blake replied. "I shall be glad of any help that you can give me."

"We cannot do much, but we are respected here, and we can go where others would not dare," the Prior replied. "We do our best to help our neighbours, and these brigands would be slower to attack us than other folk."

"Yes."

The Prior smiled a trifle humorously.

"You must become a monk," he said.

"A monk!" Blake cried.

"A monk!" Tinker gasped, round-eyed.

"Yes, a monk." And the Prior laughed as he patted Blake's shoulder. "Do you not see what I mean? You must wear our dress, and then you will be more free to move about without arousing suspicion. It is an honoured dress, Mr. Blake, and has been worn for centuries by good men and in a good cause. You now will put it on in a good cause—the cause of others. All the Brotherhood will be delighted if you will wear it; it is our badge of righteousness, and charity, and justice, and it is in defence of these great principles that you are willing to risk your life."

"I feel honoured, Prior," Blake replied courteously. "Your kind suggestion helps me considerably. Thanks very much! If you were not a man of peace, Prior, you would make a famous general."

And they all laughed heartily; whilst Pedro, aroused by the sudden noise, jumped to his feet and bayed.

CHAPTER 9.

Brother John Visits the Sick.

MORNING broke dry and sunny, and Sexton Blake stepped out of the monastery and looked around. In his many adventurous journeys in different climes he had seen much that was beautiful, even amongst the snow-clad peaks of Switzerland, but never had his gaze rested on a more awe-inspiring panorama than that which unfolded itself to his delighted eyes wherever he turned on this bright winter morning. Snow-clad peaks in all directions scaling to the blue sky like gigantic cathedral steeples; granite crags beneath, violet and purple with great acres of heather; and down in the valleys, green, undulating fields, splashed with brown tillage; and warm red homesteads, and curling smoke from dozens of chimneys drifting lazily upwards, and the rhythm of falling cascades as the melting snow rolled down to moisten the plains.

He stood motionless, drinking in the inspiring beauty, forgetting all else for the moment in that fresh glimpse of Alpine nature. For Blake's was a many-sided character, and drew inspiration from conflicting sources. The majesty of great solitudes quickened his thoughts, as did the clatter of streets, and the ceaseless commotion of heaving oceans. When most deeply stirred, his mind was most clear and vivid; his analytical powers were at their best when he stood apart from his fellow-men.

He drew a deep breath, and drank in all with the strong, pure air; nor did he stir as he heard a quick, buoyant step behind. Tinker passed him on the threshold, and having walked a few paces, the lad hesitated, stopped, and wheeled around.

"Beg pardon, Brother," he said, "have you seen Mr. Blake anywhere? If so, I'd be glad if you'd let me know, for—— Great Scott! Well, I'm fair knocked out, an' no mistake! Why, sir, you look as if you'd been a monk for the last five years, anyhow!"

Sexton Blake, with hands knit together, was dressed in the order of St. Benedict. The brown habit, the sandal shoes, the girdle round his waist, all suited his strenuous figure, and his calm, clever face showing such dignity and self-command. He smiled as Tinker stared at him, and he pointed at the scenery.

"It's hard to believe that we nearly perished in that snowstorm last night, my lad, when we see the country as it is at present," he said. "Nature can be treacherous on land as well as at sea. You have been looking for me? What is it you want to say?"

"The Prior is anxious to see you, sir. I told him I thought you had come out this way, and that I'd fetch you. It seems that—— But here he comes."

Tinker had glanced down the hall whilst speaking, and had seen the Prior advancing. Blake turned and welcomed him, and the man of peace laughed cheerily.

"Good-morning, Brother!" he said gaily, patting Blake on the shoulder. "Mr. Blake, you are one of those men who suit any dress you wear. Dress is an index to character, and you can play many parts and play them well. But I have something important and serious to tell you. One of our small farmers in the valley was seriously maltreated last night. Brother Francis, who studied medicine in his youth, and who is our infirmarian, is going down to see him. Shall I tell him that he will be accompanied by Brother John?"

Despite the anxiety in the good Prior's face, a twinkle came into his eyes as he asked this question, and Blake understood.

"Am I to be Brother John?" he asked.

"Yes. There are several in our community whose duties engage them altogether in the monastery, and who, therefore, are not known to the farmers and villagers," the Prior explained. "We have no monk here of that name at present, so you had better take it. They will not think it strange that they have not seen you before."

"So be it," Blake assented. "Tinker, I am Brother John from this out. And now, Prior, what about this business? Do you think it was Lutzatti and his gang who assaulted this poor fellow?"

"Without a doubt I do, from what I have gleaned already; but you will be able to judge more accurately when you have heard what he has to say," the Prior explained. "Ah, here comes Brother Francis! I will leave him to escort you."

"And what about my young assistant Tinker, yonder?" Blake asked. "Can you not get him a disguise, too?"

"The best we can do for him is to garb him in the national peasant dress," the Prior answered. "We'll find one for him without difficulty, and he'll look all right in it, I'm sure."

"All right, Tinker. You stay here till I return," Blake said. "Now, Brother Francis, I'm ready when you are."

Brother Francis, an alert-looking man, was carrying a big black bag, of which Blake politely offered to relieve him, but the monk protested, with a merry laugh, that he was used to harder work than that, and trudged alongside Blake sturdily. They descended into the valley, receiving respect from everyone they met, and struck out across the plains. After close on an hour's walking they approached a narrow gorge between two high peaks, and Blake, who had been mostly silent during the walk, spoke again.

"Who is this man whom you are going to see?" he asked. "Do you know much about him?"

"Not as much as we know about many of the others around here," the monk explained. "His name is Drogen, and he has not been long in the valley. But they all look to us as a right for assistance when in trouble, and we are glad to help them."

They had reached the end of the gorge, and perched on the far side, looking over a bleak plain, was a small cottage, some thirty feet up the cliff, towards which the monk began to climb. On beyond the plain was a network of rugged fastnesses. Blake followed the monk, who tapped at the door of the cottage and then entered a small room unceremoniously. A man was lying on a stretcher.

"Ah, Drogen, we have come to see you!" the monk began cheerily, laying the big black bag on a rickety table. "We heard how badly you have been treated, and I've brought you some good food and medicine. Are you very ill? Can you not sit up?"

The man slowly rose in the bed. His face was sullen, his eyes were small and shifty; a tangled beard did not improve an expression that was evil and sulky. As the monk began to open the bag, Blake looked around the room. A pile of rough clothes were lying on a chair; they were coated with red mud.

"I might be worse," Drogen muttered uncivilly. "If you leave those things there I can look after myself."

"No, no!" the monk protested, in a kindly voice. "You are in pain, and I hope to be able to relieve it. Now, where were you hurt?"

"Don't bother about that!" the man protested.

Blake eyed him keenly. Then he too crossed to the bed.

"Come! We cannot allow you to be in suffering when we have the means at hand to effect a cure," he said authoritatively. "Get your liniments ready, Brother Francis. This poor fellow shrinks from an examination because he is afraid that we are about to give him pain, but he need have no undue fear on that score."

As he spoke he pushed Drogen gently but firmly back on the bed, and deliberately began a swift examination. The man stared up at him with a strange light in his eyes; it might have been nervousness and it might have been fear. One shoulder was dislocated; there were several bruises on the same side of his body; there was nothing to show that he had been deliberately assaulted.

"We must put your arm back in its socket," Blake said quietly. "I know something about simple operations of this kind, Brother Francis. Shall I do it, or will you?"

"I leave the task to you, Brother John," the monk replied.

They lifted the man out of bed. Blake slipped his boot off, put his foot into the man's armpit, grasped his wrist, and pulled. The arm shot home to its place and the operation was over. Strapping the arm to his body carefully, they lifted him back to the bed.

"Give him a cordial," Blake suggested. "Now, Drogen, your troubles are over. In a few days you will be able to move your arm. I shall stay the day with him, Brother Francis. You can return to the monastery."

"No, no; I am as well left alone," Drogen urged. "I cannot take up your time. I can look after myself, and—and I do not like strangers about me."

"I mean to stay," Blake replied.

The monk looked curiously at Blake and then at Drogen. Blake's manner was decisive and a trifle curt; Drogen was displaying surprising agitation in the face of such apparent kindness. Blake walked to the door and the monk followed him.

"This fellow is a rogue!" Blake whispered. "Please tell the Prior that the man has aroused my suspicions. And also tell my young assistant to come here by nightfall, but not before. With the careful directions that you can give him he cannot but find the way."

"A rogue!" the monk said. "Are you not hasty in your judgment? May you not be doing him a great wrong?"

"I have seen enough already to confirm me in my opinion," Blake replied. "Now, brother, if you will kindly slip away, you will be conferring a favour upon me."

The monk did not demur. He stepped out of the cottage, and Blake, closing the door, turned, and taking a chair he sat down by the bed. Drogen was scowling at him. Blake fixed his deep, unfathomable eyes on the man, and the latter shifted his gaze. For several seconds there was silence, whilst the great detective stared at the sullen face, and Drogen plucked the bedclothes with the fingers of his injured arm. At last he could refrain no longer. With a hoarse imprecation he turned on Blake.

"Why don't you get out?" he growled. "I don't want you. Why don't you go home?"

"Because there is something I want to know which you alone can tell me," Blake replied. "Why did you say that you had been assaulted?"

"'Twasn't I said that, but the busybodies around here!" Drogen rasped out savagely. "They should have minded their business."

"They asked from kindness," Blake replied. "They don't know you as I do."

A wave of terror swept across the man's face.

"What do you mean?" he asked, clutching at his throat.

"Why this!" Blake replied. "That you are one of Lutzatti's gang!"

CHAPTER 10.

Drogen Admits His Guilt.

DESPITE his injured arm, Drogen strove desperately to jump out of the bed. His face had gone ashen pale; there was a murderous gleam in his eyes; Blake might have fared badly at that moment if the man had had his full strength.

"It's a lie!" he cried hoarsely. "I don't know Lutzatti! I've never had anything to do with him. You can't prove the contrary. I defy you! I'm a decent, respectable man, and——"

Blake pushed him back on the bed and held him firmly.

"How did you come by your injuries?" he demanded.

"I slipped and fell down a ravine. I never said that Lutzatti had attacked me. I was coming home across Mont Montgart, and I stumbled in the dark."

"And you fell on a pile of red mud at the top of a mountain which is covered with snow," Blake replied, with a short laugh. "That story won't do for me, my friend. Now lie still. If you attempt to move I'll strap you down. I'm going to search your clothes."

Drogen gasped with terror.

"You ain't a monk!" he cried. "I see that now. Who are you and what business have you here?"

Blake did not reply. He had seized Drogen's clothes, and quickly and deftly he was searching the pockets. Some coins, a knife, some thick cord, and a few greasy papers, and one small and crisp, was all he found. He opened the clean paper which was folded a couple of times, and after a glance at its contents he turned to the man on the bed, on whose forehead great beads of moisture were standing now.

"This is the proof of your villainy!" he said coldly. "It is a summons from Lutzatti to be at a meeting-place at ten o'clock at night."

Drogen thumped his forehead with his free hand.

"Fool! Fool that I was!" he groaned. "Why did I not destroy it!"

"I have only to take you from here and hand you over to the authorities and you know what your fate would be," Blake went on. "You are the accomplice of an outlaw and bandit. You are in my power and you are my prisoner. As you hope for mercy, you had better speak the truth."

"Mercy! There is none for me if I turn informer!" the wretched man moaned. "You do not know Lutzatti. He spares no one!"

"If you speak the truth I will befriend you," Blake replied. "But if you play me false, then certainly you have no room for hope."

Drogen twisted on the bed in a frenzy of mental agony.

"What would you have me tell you?" he asked.

"Where Lutzatti is at present," Blake explained.

"I can't tell you that. I don't know myself. He is always moving from one place to another."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At Altgen—ten miles from here."

"What mischief was afoot?"

"Don't ask me!" Drogen implored piteously. "If I betray——"

"As I said already, Lutzatti cannot harm you," Blake interjected. "Did you not find that a young lad had been taken prisoner, and that you were to look after him and prevent his escape?"

The swift change of expression on the villain's face would have been comical under other and less serious circumstances. His jaw dropped, he looked at Blake dully, then he turned on the bed with his face to the wall.

"You can read one's thoughts," he muttered. "You can see right into a man's soul. You make me tremble with fear."

"What happened when you met Lutzatti? Come! I don't mean to stand any nonsense!" Blake continued sharply. "How did you meet with this accident? And what happened to the lad?"

Drogen turned swiftly on the bed, and his face now was livid with passion.

"What happened to him?" he repeated savagely. "I wish I had the handling of him and he'd have cause to feel sorry. The young imp! 'Twas he served me the way you see."

"Oh! He put up a good fight, then—quite what I'd expect," Blake replied. "Now tell me everything without more ado, or I'll march you out of this straightaway. And what sort of a reception do you hope to get when I take you through the village, and the folks know that you are one of the scoundrels who are terrifying them all?"

Drogen shivered, and Blake took out his watch.

"I give you five minutes in which to collect your thoughts," he went on. "I want a full explanation as to the number of the gang, the way you came to be mixed up in it, and, in particular, about the events of last night. If I believe what you say I will protect you from Lutzatti. If you will not speak, or if I think you tell me false, you will be in prison before the sun sets."

There was a long silence. Blake drew a chair forward and sat down by the bed, watch in hand. Drogen gazed up at the ceiling, rubbing his forehead nervously. At last he glanced nervously at Blake.

"I'll tell all!" he said huskily. "It's my only chance; I see that!"

"Then begin at once."

"'Twas ill-luck that brought me in the way of Lutzatti," Drogen began. "I was in trouble in another canton, and I left, and was on my way here when I fell in with him. He seized me, and for three days he kept me prisoner. Before he'd let me go—and he was none too gentle—he had forced me to join the gang, and I had taken the oath of secrecy. And to break that oath means death. He caught the others the same way. He has them scattered all round the district for sixty miles, and sometimes he summons some and sometimes others. It depends upon the place he's at."

"How many are there?"

"Forty or fifty, I suppose."

"And like you they live in the villages and only join him at night when he needs their services?"

"All except a dozen or so who are suspected already and are marked men like him."

"Now, what happened last night?"

"I got that letter you have seen, and I went to the meeting-place. We concealed ourselves in a thicket by the side of the road and waited."

"Was Lutzatti with you?"

"Yes, he was."

"Go on."

"He told us that a man and a boy would be passing by before long, that a guide would be escorting them, and that we were to seize the boy and hurry him away."

"And that guide was one of the gang?"

"That is so. After a time we got notice from our spies that the party was close at hand, and later on, at a signal from Lutzatti, we sprang out on to the road. Another man and I made for the lad. He was taken aback, and stood startled for a second. Then he fought hard for his liberty. The two of us had more than enough to hold him, so at last we shouted for assistance. A third man came to our help, and we began to drag him along the road. He struggled every foot of the way, but we managed to haul him along."

"Now, what was that man like?" Blake asked, leaning forward.

"He was a stout man with grey hair, and he looked like many of the rich tourists that come here in the summer-time," Drogen replied. "Beyond that I had no chance of noticing him."

"What happened to the lad?"

"We pushed him along, and he was shouting and wrestling fiercely, and we got him a good way along the road."

"Did he call to his friend?"

"He did."

"Ah! What name did he call him by?"

Drogen did not answer. He was gazing out of the window with a frown on his face.

"I've been trying to think, but I can't remember," he said.

Blake looked Drogen full in the face.

"It would be well for you to recall that name before long," he said significantly. "Now tell me the rest about the lad."

There's not much to tell as far as I'm concerned," Drogen replied sourly.

"We were close to a side of the road, where there was no hedge or wall, and the lad for a moment shook himself free. I was the first to catch on to him again, and he tripped me up. I went sprawling over the edge of the road, and I dropped ten feet or more, with a lot of mud and stones down below. I was done for then, and I yelled for help, but they didn't bother about me. I heard the lad shouting still, and I knew by his cries that he was still being dragged away, and then the cries stopped and I heard no more."

"And what did you do?"

"I lay where I had fallen for a time. But at last I knew that no one would come back to my assistance, and I was perishing with the cold. I staggered to my feet and crawled back here somehow, and the day had dawned as I came along, and some of the folks saw me, and helped me here, and went up to the monastery, I suppose."

"And you say that this happened at a place called Altgen, ten miles from here?"

"Yes."

"Well, for your own sake I hope you are speaking the truth," Blake replied significantly. "Now, you had better have a rest. I don't mean to ask you any more questions at present."

He stood up as he spoke, and going to the big black bag that the monk had carried to the cottage, he drew forth several articles of food, amongst them a tin of soup. Placing a saucepan on the fire he heated the soup and gave Drogen a cup of it and some bread. The man devoured both voraciously.

The effects of the nourishment soon became apparent. The colour came back to his face, he settled himself comfortably on the bed, and after a time he closed his eyes. Blake locked the cottage door, and taking a seat again, he filled his pipe and began to smoke thoughtfully. So the day passed away, Drogen dozing from time to time, and Blake mounting guard. The sun's rays filtered through the cottage windows, passing gradually across the floor, and evening stole on. At last the shades of night began to envelop the cottage, and Blake had a hurried meal. As he was putting the delf to rights on the dresser later on there was a soft tap outside. Blake stepped noiselessly across the floor and opened the door. Tinker was standing there.

"Come on, my lad!" he said. "Do you think that anyone noticed you on the way?"

"Can't say for certain, sir, but I came as cautiously as I could. What's the little game now? Have you got hold of anything that's likely to help us?"

"Yes. We start from here in an hour's time. Have some grub whilst there's the chance. We're going after Lutzatti!"

CHAPTER 11.

A Monk Amidst Bandits.

LEAVING the cottage when darkness had quite set in, Blake and Tinker descended to the road and struck out away from the village. The track was good and they were able to walk swiftly. In an hour's time they were in a wild country, but still making quick headway. On all sides rugged cliffs projected; as they passed through each defile they came upon a fresh scene of towering mountains; the country in this locality seemed to be all the same. They pushed on, walking about four miles to the hour, and chatting occasionally. Blake led the way, and Tinker followed in his footsteps close behind.

It was when they had been close on a couple of hours on the road that Blake surprised Tinker by turning suddenly and clutching the lad by the arm. The great detective's face, pallid in the moonlight, was set in an eager expression; in his monk's garb he looked at that moment almost uncanny. Tinker, taken aback by the sudden movement, was about to ask for an explanation, when Blake put a finger on his own lips and pointed down the path.

They had just turned a corner, and the path stretched out dark and straight for a couple of hundred yards. And a man was hurrying along it, walking nervously, swinging a big stick, and never turning his head towards either side. He was going in the same direction as they were; probably there had only be a few hundred yards between them during the last few miles. But that was not the most surprising fact.

"Hist! Draw into the shadow of the rocks till he turns round the next bend!" Blake whispered. "Well, my lad, what do you think of this?"

Tinker did not know what to think. He took off his cap and mopped his face, though he was in no wise warm, and then he clapped his cap on the back of his head again. He felt inclined to whistle, but he had the prudence to refrain. So he dived his hands into his pockets, studied the ground attentively for some seconds, and then gazed up at Blake.

"Rum go, ain't it, sir?" he suggested.

Blake's figure was tense. He was watching the receding figure.

"Amazing!" he replied.

"He don't live anywhere hereabouts," Tinker continued. "He's not a Swede. Why, he's dressed like any of those chaps you see trotting behind one of Cook's guides wherever you go! Tweed jacket, sporting pants, long stockings, thick boots, saucy cap! Sort of chap, I reckon, who finds use for 'em at Margate once a fortnight every year, and on Sundays, of course, in the suburbs, with a fancy tike at his heels. An' he don't look lost or strayed either! He's walking as if he owns the earth!"

"He's a tourist," Blake agreed. "This is most interesting! Now, my lad, he got round the corner, we'll follow on cautiously."

They forged ahead again, gazed round the next corner, and found that it stretched out for a full half mile. The man was not to be seen. Blake drew back.

"Either he suspects that he's being followed, or else he's tired and he's sitting down in the bracken," he said. "We must——"

"No, he ain't!" Tinker chuckled. "See him up yonder on the sky-line, sir! He ain't a bad 'un to climb! He's lean enough and his legs are long enough, anyhow, to get him over the ground."

Blake looked up in the direction the lad indicated, and saw that the man had climbed a cliff about thirty feet high, and was walking along the edge. Suddenly he moved from the edge of the cliff and was lost to view. Blake advanced, gazing attentively along the side of the road, and he soon saw a small path running up the cliff.

"This is the way he got up. Come along!" he said.

"And what about Lutzatti?" Tinker asked. "Ain't you going after him, sir?"

Blake did not reply. He was hurrying stealthily up the path, and when he reached the top he crouched down and looked around. The man was disappearing behind some stunted trees. Following the path along the edge of the cliff, Blake saw that it turned across the plains, and now he knew that the stranger had taken it of set purpose, and that it was frequently used. He and Tinker pressed on.

Across the country they went, rising higher every hundred yards, for though the ascent was gradual, still it was continual. From that time on Blake did not let the stranger out of sight. They all tramped along for fifty minutes, when the man began to scale a sharp incline. He went well to one side, and Blake, reaching the spot where he had begun the climb, saw that there were two paths—one that the man had taken, and another running up the opposite end of the cliff.

"You follow that fellow and I'll work round the other way," he whispered to Tinker. "Whichever side he turns when he gets to the top, one of us then is bound to come up with him, and it's about time we got a good look at him. Hurry on! He's near the top already."

Tinker started at once. He went up the cliff with his usual nimbleness, and when he got to the top he was surprised to find that he was in a dense thicket. It ran right and left for a couple of miles, and on ahead for five hundred yards, until it reached a precipitous peak, rising several hundred feet, and almost perpendicular. The man was keeping to a small track, making for the mountain, and the lad drew up on him swiftly. Suddenly he seemed to waver; then he pressed on; then he halted, and then Tinker heard a cry.

A couple of figures had sprung suddenly into view. They fell upon the stranger, and Tinker, all his feelings aroused by the sudden and dastard attack, raced at once to his assistance. With a terrific yell he dashed forward, and he had nearly reached the scene of the struggle when another man jumped out from behind a bush and barred his way. Tinker rushed at him full tilt and they closed and struggled.

And now a horn rang out on the silent air, and at the signal the whole place seemed alive with men. They sprang from behind bushes and rocks; they clambered down the mountainside; swiftly and with loud shouts they surged all in the one direction. Tinker had wrenched himself free, had dexterously tripped up his assailant, and was again dashing to the assistance of the stranger. But he had not gone twenty yards when he was gripped and pulled down, and he saw half a dozen swarthy, evil faces gazing at him in sullen fury.

He fought desperately, yelling, as a warning to Blake. A rough hand was clapped over his mouth, and a strong knee was pressed against his chest, pinning him to the ground and stifling his breathing. Lights began to dance before his eyes, he heard shouts and answering cries, and they gradually grew less and less; consciousness was quickly slipping away. And then suddenly he was released, and raising himself he saw the villains who had attacked him standing in a group as if mesmerised with fear.

A dark-robed figure came rushing across the heather, and the men turned and fled.

"A monk!" one cried. "It is the ghost of a monk! 'Tis an evil night's work that we have been doing!"

Sexton Blake sprang to Tinker's side. Some men were running in sheer terror; others farther on were holding the stranger; one dominant figure, apart from the rest, was giving instructions sharply. Blake deliberately strode forward.

"Release that man!" he thundered. "He is a Britisher, and it will go hard with you if you dare to make him a prisoner. Release him, I say! I know who you all are! You are Lutzatti's gang!"

The bandits gripping the stranger let go their hold. Blake advanced. The man gazed at him, and in that moment Blake caught a good view of his face. To his surprise and to the intense astonishment of Tinker, the man did not avail himself of this chance to escape. He gave a cry, pointed a finger at Blake, and turning, he sped at full speed towards the cliff!

The bandits gathered together and barred the way. Blake stood silent and still. An extraordinary change had come over the great detective's face. His lips were parted, his eyes were full of a strange light; he seemed to be lost to his surroundings. He watched the retreating figure with an intentness that gave no room for other thought. The bandit who had been giving his orders spoke at this juncture.

"Stand back!" he cried hoarsely. "We are armed, and at a word from me a score of bullets would pierce your heart! But we have no quarrel with the Brothers of St. Benedict, and we do not wish to go to violence. Do not dare to follow us! If you disobey your death will be at your own door!"

He waved his arms peremptorily to his supporters, and in obedience to the gesture they moved away. The man whom Blake had sought to release was at the foot of the precipice by this time, and was climbing it in desperate haste. The others more slowly retired in the same direction, and Blake stood motionless as a statue. Up and up the precipice they went; when at the top they paused for a moment and looked back. Then they vanished beyond the crest, and all was silent once again. The wind swept over the heather, and that was the only sound in that vast and desolate region.

Blake still stood gazing at the precipice. His arms were folded across his chest; the wind flapped his robe and played around his tense face, and Tinker watched him silently. Never in all his experiences had the lad been more surprised. He held his peace and waited, and it was only when Blake, after a heavy sigh, selected a stone and sat down that he ventured to speak.

"You know who that man is, sir?" he said.

"I have a notion that I do! But I can't say for certain," Blake replied. "Tinker, this business gets more complicated at every turn. That fellow is not stout; therefore, he cannot be the man who brought young Benton here. And this man came of his own free will! He was not caught by chance; he came this way of his own accord, and he had some definite purpose in his mind. Did he also come about Robert Benton? I think he did!"

"Why do you think that?" Tinker asked.

"Because he ran away from me. Despite my disguise he knew me, and he would sooner trust himself to the mercy of Lutzatti than to me! Why is he in such fear of me? Would not any ordinary man be glad of the chance to escape? It's only criminals who run away from me, Tinker. And he is a desperate criminal!"

"And what do you mean to do now?"

"To go home. There's no more work for us here to-night."

As Blake spoke he stood up, and together they retraced their steps across the heather, and down until they reached the road leading to the monastery. In silence they tramped the long journey back, and day was breaking as they drew near to the cottage from which they had made the start.

"Wait here for a few minutes," Blake said. "I will go in and see how that fellow Drogen has got through the night, and give him some nourishment if he needs it."

He climbed up to the cottage and opened the door. The early morning light was filtering through the window. And after the first glance Blake sprang into the room, and then stood stock still, for the bed was empty!

CHAPTER 12.

Fresh Complications.

YES, Drogen had gone!

Blake looked around the room. Then he went to the door and whistled to Tinker. When the lad followed him into the cottage he saw the great detective sitting in a chair.

"Where's Drogen, sir?" he asked.

For answer, Blake burst into a peal of laughter. Tinker stared at him dumbfounded.

"He's cleared out!" Blake replied. "Tinker, I was much depressed on my way back just now. What a world it is!" He jumped to his feet as he spoke. "When one has most cause to feel desperate, something turns up to give the necessary fillip again. Drogen has sought to baffle me, and he has only played into my hands. Hurry quickly to the monastery and fetch Pedro at once!"

Tinker turned and left, and Blake began a critical examination of the room. After careful thought he came to the conclusion that Drogen had dressed himself as best he could, and gone away alone. Truly, the man must have been stricken with a great fear to have faced such a desperate resolve in his weak and injured condition. He had gone to acquaint Lutzatti with the fact that Blake was on his track. He had preferred facing the bandit's wrath and throwing himself on his mercy whilst yet he might possibly earn pardon by warning him in time. Blake felt a touch of pity for the man, plodding at that moment in pain and misery through the snow, not knowing what his reception might be, not daring to hope that the terrible suspense might end in his forgiveness. And at this moment, too, the great detective realised to the full the grim and forceful character of Lutzatti, when he was able to strike such terror into the hearts of those whom he had gathered into his net.

Tinker returned leading Pedro by the leash, and Blake at once put him on the track. When the noble hound had nosed round the cottage for some time he moved towards the door, and, descending to the road, he kept to it for a couple of hundred yards and then crossed in through the bracken. He worked steadily and patiently, and it was clear to Blake that the scent still held firm. A quarter of a mile from the road Pedro got on to a narrow path and moved away from the monastery. The path evidently was a short cut to the village from across the hills, but one most probably used more in summer than in winter. Pedro went on steadily, never hesitating, never halting, and the sun had been shining for a couple of hours, and the workmen were in the fields down in the valleys when at last Blake stepped forward quickly, fastened the leash to his collar again and pointed on ahead.

"See that hut, my lad, peeping out from behind the clump of trees?" he said to Tinker. "I strongly suspect that Drogen has gone there. We can do nothing at this hour, so we will rest here. When evening draws on we will make our investigations. Go to one of the farmhouses down below now and get some food for us. Then we will have the sleep we both need so much."

"And you don't think that Drogen will escape in the meantime?" Tinker asked, in some alarm.

"Once I know for certain that Drogen has called at that cottage I'm not concerned about him any longer," Blake replied, with one of his curious smiles. "By coming here he has given me the clue I wanted. I believe I can work on step by step now till I get face to face with Lutzatti. Sit down, Pedro! You're very eager to keep on the trail, old dog, but you must be patient like the rest of us."

Blake and Tinker had a rough but hearty meal, and then they stretched themselves at full length and slept without stirring for several hours. The sun was sinking behind the great cliffs, and the valleys already were plunged in gloom when they awoke, and after enjoying the remainder of the victuals that Tinker had obtained, Blake led Pedro forward again, and the intelligent hound at once took up the scent. He climbed by a devious path to the cottage, as Blake had anticipated, and when a hundred yards from it Blake whispered to Tinker, and they lay down.

Evening stole on. The crimson curtain of clouds over the mountains lost their vivid hue and gradually faded to yellow and to grey, and all around was slowly hidden from sight. A light sprang up in the cottage, and Blake watched it intently. Another hour of weary watching passed, and then the light swept from room to room. Suddenly it was extinguished, and Blake jumping to his feet and holding Pedro firmly in the leash, bade Tinker follow. Stepping cautiously, they faced the cottage door, and dropped to the ground again when about thirty yards from it. In five minutes' time two men emerged and stood for some seconds on the threshold. Then one advanced towards Blake and Tinker, and the other limped away slowly round the corner of the house.

The man advancing to the spot where the watchers lay concealed was certainly not Drogen. He was bigger, stronger, heavier; and he swung both arms as he strode along. He came so close to the spot where they were hiding that Tinker feared Pedro would betray their presence, but Blake's hand rested on the hound's massive head, and his nose was buried in the grass. His eyes, though, were blinking vigilantly; he took full stock of the man. The man passed on, and Blake waited, and Tinker wondered what the next move would be.

After a long pause Blake half rose and gazed cautiously around. Then he stood up and led Pedro towards the cottage. The door was only on the hasp and opened to his touch. Entering, and closing the door gently when Tinker and Pedro were inside also, Blake lit his pocket electric-lamp and waved it to and fro. The cottage was very similar to the one occupied by Drogen, and Blake immediately began a hurried search. He left nothing at rest. He searched the bed and the dresser, he dived into every corner, finally he pulled out an old wooden-box and went through its contents. There were clothes in the box and odds and ends of all descriptions. He searched the pockets in the clothes, finding some papers which engaged his attention for several minutes. He carefully looked at an old pair of boots, and a hat and a gun hanging over the hearth; when at last he turned to leave he knew every article in the room, and had committed each to memory. Then he held the boots and clothes for Pedro to sniff, and when the hound, knowing what was required of him, moved restlessly to the door, Blake told Tinker that he was ready to make a start again.

They passed out and Pedro took up the scent, following the stranger quickly. The noble hound went down past the spot where they had rested, and on across the bracken and up a high hill. He worked steadily, tugging at the leash, and Blake, never knowing the moment when they might come up with their quarry, stared as best he could through the darkness ahead, ready for any emergency. The journey was laborious. Now they climbed great heights, only to descend several hundred feet again. Now they trailed through tense brushwood, now they slipped and stumbled over rough stones; and Pedro held on doggedly, and they knew that the man they were following could not be far away. At last, after five hours of protracted walking, they reached a path looking down into a valley below, and for the first time Pedro showed signs of being baffled.

Blake looked around and down below. Despite the gloom, he could discern that they were on a small circle of hills; higher up, great peaks loomed against the sky-line; down below was a small glade, hemmed in on all sides. It was covered with grass and dotted with trees, and seemed empty and silent. Pedro was standing on a flat stone, sniffing the air. He would not go farther along the path, which led up the hillside, and Blake noticed a rock projecting a few feet below where they were grouped together. He jumped down to the rock, and Pedro followed. The hound at once became alert and eager, and Blake had some difficulty in preventing him from dashing down to the glade.

"The man came this way," Blake whispered to Tinker. "He is in hiding down yonder, but I doubt much if he thinks that we have followed him. We must wait here and watch."

They sat down. Nor had they long to wait before they felt more than recompensed for their long tramp and weary vigil. From several directions men came silently as ghosts into the glade. They came singly and in couples, from the folds in the hills at all corners of the glade, and they met and formed in an increasing group as time went on. Blake counted them as they appeared, and they numbered forty before the last seemed to have arrived. With hand clasping his chin the great detective bent forward intently. Once Tinker began to whisper to him, but he abruptly cut him short. He seemed still to be watchful and expectant. Presently he drew himself straight as if a great tension had snapped. And Tinker, following the poise of his head, saw a solitary individual stalking across the grass towards the group.

"That is Lutzatti!" Blake murmured. "Ah, see what a stir his arrival has made!"

The bandits had pressed forward in a body to greet their chief. They surrounded him when he stopped, and for half an hour they held council together. Then they broke up, some quickly leaving the glade and others loitering. Lutzatti marched off the way he had come with ten other bandits, and his departure was the signal for all to go. They hurried away in different directions, and Blake did not move until certain that every-one had left. Then he stood up, stretched his cramped limbs, and yawned.

"A good night's work!" he said. "We have found one of Lutzatti's lairs. This is even more than I had hoped for."

Tinker looked blankly at the great detective.

"But Benton wasn't here, and we don't even know where he is," he urged. "And we can't get at Lutzatti. He has gone away with a crowd around him."

"All that is true," Blake replied tranquilly. "I hope you didn't expect that we'd be able to deal straight off with a gang such as this, eh? See though what we have gained. As long as the villains do not suspect that this meeting-place has been discovered, they will come to it continually. And, indeed, it would go hard with them to discover one more suitable in every respect even in this wild country. I don't think that you and I could find the way back that we have come. I have an idea that after all our tramp we are not very far from our starting point. We have been walking in something very like a maze."

"Then what's the next move, sir?" Tinker asked.

"Why, to stay in this neighbourhood," Blake replied. "When day breaks we must search for some place where we can stay concealed and remain there, perhaps for a very long time. It will be dull, Tinker, and there will be a lot for you to do, for we cannot live without food, and you'll have many a long march, my lad, to the monastery and back, when we explore the country and find a direct path. I have to rescue young Benton single-handed from the clutches of the gang, and that only can be done by strategy. I must bide my chance, and before I strike I must know much more than I do at present. But though our risk is very serious, still I have hope—great hope!"

CHAPTER 13.

Anxious Days.

DAYS passed, days of hardship and monotony. Tinker chafed inwardly under the delay, but he never allowed his feelings to get the upper hand. And as Blake had said, the lad had many a long journey to take, and he found a salutary safeguard in physical exertion though often accompanied by great anxiety.

Blake had found a hiding-place where he believed that they could remain undetected. It was a cave, perched half-way up a mountain, and hidden in brushwood. There, sitting at the opening, he could look down upon the glade where the gang of bandits had met. Unseen himself, he could see much on a bright night, but many nights had been dark, and on these the bandits could meet without his knowledge. And when after ten days and nights nothing had been seen of any of them, Tinker began to fear that Blake was only losing time.

But Blake throughout was calm and cheery. In the daytime he would sit enjoying the beautiful scenery, or helping Tinker to cook the meals, laughing at the lad's jokes, and telling tales from his great knowledge of the world and experience of men, tales that whiled away many pleasant hours. At times he would leave the cave and wander away. Hours often passed before his return; once he was absent for a day and a night, till at last Tinker became seriously anxious for his safety. And Tinker, too, had his moments of excitement. When provisions were needed and darkness had fallen, the lad would set out for the monastery, travelling cautiously, watchful as a sleuthhound, not knowing the moment when he might encounter a lurking enemy. And after his long tramp back with a heavy sack on his back, hungry and tired out, Blake's cordial welcome did much to hearten him, and he would stretch himself with a feeling of satisfaction on his hard couch and sleep as soundly as if enjoying the comforts of a house. Then Blake would go out on his investigations. He always tried to be in the cave when Tinker was awake, for he knew how hard the lad found the enforced inactivity, and he did his best to keep him in good spirits.

But Blake in those days, too, had much to cause him an uneasiness he never showed, and much to unravel if he only could. His mind was still baffled; he was moving onwards like a man in the dark. Who, for instance, was the stout man he had caught a glimpse of at Halsford? Was he identical with the man who had come to the monastery with young Robert Benton? Who, again, was the tall, thin man who had appeared so suddenly on the road, working his way towards Lutzatti, and who had grown so terrified when he had recognised the great detective? Was he, too, out in this wild region by reason of an interest in young Benton? Why, for that matter, had this lad been decoyed from England? The scoundrels had got hold of his money; surely that was all they wanted! What could they hope to gain further by seizing the lad and handing him over to Lutzatti? That villain would demand a large ransom before he released the lad, for it was in this way that he made an unscrupulous living. But young Benton was now penniless. What object could there be, then, in holding him a prisoner?

These questions were ever present to Blake, and an answer to the riddles was not forthcoming. But in these days on which he sat and waited on the hills one greater question occasioned him even more perplexity, and he felt that it was on the solution of this that all depended. Who was Lutzatti?

Ah, if he could but know! The mysterious and masterful scoundrel had organised one of the most disciplined and audacious bands that Blake had ever attempted to crush. He held his followers as in a vice; they came and went and performed his bidding with unquestioning obedience; they lived scattered over the country, yet none dared to betray him; he had defied the Government of the country, and the Government had realised its own impotence.

This was no ordinary criminal, no rough, self-tutored despot who relied solely on oppression and brute force to gain his ends. No. Blake's shrewd mind divined that he was quite another sort of man—one who had strength because he had knowledge; one who could command because he had the ability and the education to build up a powerful and self-dependent organisation; one who, if given to orderly ways, could have made a great fortune and a great name in the legitimate fields of commerce. Who, then, could he be? Where did he live? And how, possibly, did the scoundrels who kidnapped Robert Benton manage to get in touch with him? They did not roam the wilds seeking him in the first instance. That would have been the height of folly. They found him in a city somewhere. Blake felt certain of that.

So he mostly sat at the mouth of the cave and watched, and waited, as only strong men can wait, and command their burning desire for action. Occasionally he came and went, travelling far more than once, studying the country, preparing himself in all ways for the time when fortune would give him the chance to act. He knew that, in the first instance, Lutzatti must come to him; that if he tramped all over the country seeking out the various lairs to and from which the bandit chief moved from time to time he would be only exhausting his energies in a futile pursuit. No. He could do nothing till Lutzatti came again to the glade, down on which Blake looked so often and so watchfully. Lutzatti was bound to come there some time or another, and when he did, Blake was ready to strike.

Fortune at last favoured the intrepid and indomitable detective, as it always favours those who know how to wait.

One night when Tinker was sleeping, and Pedro was curled up in a corner of the cave, and the moon occasionally peeped out behind rolling clouds scurrying across the heavens before a strong wind that moaned over the rock-strewn landscape, some figures stepped into the glade and were followed at varying intervals by others.

Blake quickly aroused Tinker.

"The time has come, my lad," he whispered—"the time for which we have waited so long. Lutzatti is close at hand!"

Tinker jumped to his feet. Sleep left him as if by magic; he was awake and alert on the instant.

"Good job!" he whispered back eagerly. "Now, thank goodness, we'll be able to get on the move again!"

They walked to the mouth of the cave and looked down. The bandits once again were gathered in an expectant group, and once again Lutzatti appeared presently and advanced towards them. They got into eager consultation, and Blake prepared to start.

"I'm going round the edge of the mountain, and I will descend into the glade at the far corner yonder," he explained to Tinker. When Lutzatti leaves, I am going after him—ay, even if twenty of his gang go with him!"

"And I am to go with you, sir?" Tinker urged.

"No, my lad. I have other work for you. You are to put the leash on Pedro and follow on my track. Do not start until quite certain that all have left the glade. You must take no risk on that score, remember. Pedro will follow me, for certain, even if you are delayed several hours, and thus we will meet again. Now get the leash and fasten it to his collar."

Tinker aroused the noble hound, and showed him the leash. Pedro at once stood rigid and expectant, his tail wagging slowly, his bloodshot eyes full of an expressive inquiry. Blake patted him on the head. Then he walked to the mouth of the cave and looked back. Pedro was straining at the leash.

"He knows he's to come after me," Blake whispered to Tinker. "Tie him up now till it's time for you to start. And good-bye, my lad. When next we meet it will be far from here, or I shall be much mistaken."

Nodding cheerily, he left the cave, and began to creep round the side of the mountain. He had noticed the fold in the hill through which Lutzatti had arrived, and he made towards it as swiftly as was consistent with prudence. Down in the glade the gang were still conversing together, but at any time the conference might come to an end; and if Lutzatti got out of the glade before Blake reached the point for which he was making, he knew that he would lose his tracks. His past investigations in that direction during the weary days of waiting had convinced him of that.

He pushed on, looking down continually, and observed after a while that the conspirators began to move about occasionally, as if the important work of the meeting had been concluded. Altogether, from the start, Blake had to cover a couple of miles, and he only just managed to reach the narrow opening to the glade when he saw that the gang were on the move. Dropping down behind a wall, he waited anxiously. A dozen men were coming in his direction, and he had no difficulty in discerning that the leader was amongst them, walking in the centre, talking vivaciously, and commanding the close and respectful attention of his companions. They trudged past together, and, rising to his full height, Blake went after them.

For a few hundred yards the path held a circuitous course, as Blake knew already; then it straightened out, with granite cliffs on either side. He pressed on until he had reached the last bend, and turning cautiously, he watched the receding figures. It was at this spot that he had often been puzzled in the past. Where did Lutzatti go to? On ahead was a bleak, barren country, stretching for miles. It was rough climbing for any pedestrian, and impossible for a horseman. The way that Lutzatti was wont to saunter into the glade was quite inconsistent with the gait of a man who had taken a long and arduous journey. Blake could not believe it was his custom to come across those high peaks and rock-strewn valleys. Yet, if not, what way did he come? The great detective had asked himself that question many times. Now he was about to receive an explanation.

Suddenly Lutzatti and his companions stopped. They stood talking for several minutes. Then half a dozen went on ahead. The other half vanished. They seemed to have walked right into the heart of the crag fringing the left side of the road.

Blake, with mind amazed and all senses on the alert, noted the spot where they had disappeared, and pressed on. He arrived at a thick covering of heather, hiding the crag to a space of several yards. He had passed that place before, and had noticed it, and examined it, but never as he did at this moment. Pulling back the brushwood, he forced his way through till he scraped his knees against the rock. Moving on, he came to a stout, high bush. He crept between it and the rock, and stretched out his hand. It felt a void. He touched the button of his electric lamp. He had found a tunnel.

So much was explained. This was the way Lutzatti travelled to and from the glade. Blake had no fear that he would be discovered by those on ahead. They were doubtless hurrying through the noisome tunnel, which they knew well, into the fresh air on the far side. He pressed on, stumbling occasionally, on and on, for nearly half an hour. Then he saw the moonlight in the distance, and he heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs. He hurried to the end of the tunnel and looked out. Lutzatti was riding away along a well-kept road.

"He can't escape me now!" Blake muttered.

And he broke into a run.

CHAPTER 14.

The Mayor of Splugaren.

THE other bandits had disappeared, and Lutzatti was riding home alone. Clad in a monk's garb, with the loose clothes hanging round his limbs, Blake had considerable difficulty in keeping up a rapid pace, and he realised before long that Lutzatti was drawing away. He held on, however, resolved to continue the chase as long as possible, and for three miles he kept the villain on and off in sight. Then Lutzatti crested the top of a high hill, and Blake knew that he could not hope to follow him.

He stopped running, and plodded on steadily, drawing his breath in great gasps after his terrific exertions. He meant to go on, to find to what neighbourhood the wide, broad road led, for it gave every indication of constant care and continual traffic. By the time that he arrived at the top of the hill he had largely regained his wind, and, to his delight, he saw a twinkling light to the left-hand side of the valley down below. He walked on briskly now, and half an hour later he was tapping at the door of a farmhouse. He had not long to wait. The door was soon flung open, and he saw a respectable, elderly farmer standing on the threshold.

When the farmer's eyes became somewhat accustomed to the gloom, and he perceived a man dressed like a monk standing outside, and apparently craving hospitality, the suspicion that had been in his eyes faded rapidly away. He threw the door wide open, and took off his cap.

"Enter, Brother!" he said. "This is a glad surprise! It is seldom that those of your Order journey so far afield, and so late at night, too."

Blake courteously returned the salutation, and stepped into the hall. The farmer called to his wife to acquaint her with the news, and to bid her prepare a meal. Then he ushered Blake into a comfortable sitting-room.

"I am sorry to disturb you at this unseasonable hour, my good friend," Blake began; "but I have come far, and I am tired, and yet I must press on. I am going on most important business to the town of——" He stopped, as if struggling to recall a name.

"To Splugaren?" the farmer suggested. "That is the nearest town, Brother, that lies on this road."

"Ah, yes, to Splugaren," Blake replied. "But I do not know this neighbourhood; I am travelling in it for the first time. What distance may Splugaren be? And is the road straight from here to there, or must I turn off anywhere?"

"'Tis a matter of about twenty-five kilometres," the farmer replied quickly. "A long journey at this time of night. And you say that you have travelled far already. Cannot you rest here to-night, and start in the morning when you are refreshed?"

Blake shook his head.

"The business is too serious," he explained. "When I have rested I must be on the road again."

"Then you shall have my horse, Brother," the farmer replied firmly. "I have received many kindnesses from the Brothers at the monastery in my life, and it is but right that I should make some return when chance serves me. Sit you down and have a meal whilst I saddle the nag, and you can leave him here on your way back. Ho, good wife! Make haste with some supper. The Brother is hungry and tired, and he must not delay. Be quick, lest he leaves without tasting of your fare."

A pleasant-faced woman hurried into the room carrying a tray, and she curtsied as she saw Blake. The farmer left the room, and went out to the stable to bridle and saddle the horse, and Blake began a hurried meal, not knowing when next he might have the chance of tasting food. In five minutes' time the horse was at the door, and Blake jumped into the saddle. Bidding farewell to his kind host, he cantered away, glad to find that the nag was a good, steady roadster.

Twenty-five kilometres are, roughly, equal to about fifteen miles, and after seventy minutes' riding Blake began to realise that he was approaching the outskirts of a good-sized town. The rocky defile gave place to a broad valley; cottages peeped out from behind small clusters of trees at regular intervals; the land showed signs of cultivation; and the road improved. In another twenty minutes he was entering a narrow, cobbled street, and now he jumped to the ground and led his horse by the bridle. He turned from the narrow street into a wider one, then into a market-square, and here he saw a two-storeyed inn, with lights still burning in one of the front rooms. As all the other houses he had passed had been in darkness, and as the streets had been silent and empty, he was surprised that anyone should be astir in the inn at that late hour. He walked to the door and knocked loud, seeking to gain admittance.

Instantly the light in the room went out. Blake knocked again, but received no answer, though he waited patiently for several minutes. Then leading the nag by the bridle he walked round to the yard. A man was busy there grooming down a horse, and he stopped work and looked sharply at Blake as the latter entered. When he noticed his garb he stood straight and touched his cap.

"I've come a long journey, and I'd be glad to rest here to-night," Blake began; "but all in the inn seem to be asleep. Can I take my horse into a stall, and leave him there? Ah, that seems a fine animal that you are attending to! To whom does he belong?"

"To the Mayor of Splugaren!" the ostler replied. "You may well say that he is a noble horse," he continued, with the pride of a lover of thoroughbreds that is to be found all the world over; "there is not his like in this canton anywhere! He's swift and sure-footed and gentle."

Blake did not reply. He led the farmer's horse into a stall, unsaddled and unbridled him, placed a halter over his head, and seizing a whisp of straw he began to groom him deftly, for no matter how tired himself, or how urgent the call of duty, the kind-hearted detective would never forget the claims of animals that had tired themselves in his service. As he worked, he heard a soft and peculiar whistle, and stepping to the door he peeped out. He saw the ostler leave the mayor's horse and walk towards the inn. The man returned in a few minutes and entered the stall.

"I've just been to the back door, brother, and you can have a bed there to-night if you like," he said. "Neither is it proper that you should be engaged on such a task as this, and so late at night. I will attend to the horse, and if you go round to the front door, Dame Morel will conduct you to your room."

A furtive look had come into the man's eyes, a look which did not escape Blake's keen observation. He thanked the man, left the yard, and walked round to the front door of the inn. He had only tapped once on this occasion when the door was opened noiselessly. He was not aware of the fact at once, for he was gazing keenly up the market-square. Round the corner a figure was flitting.

"Come in and welcome, brother!" a voice said.

Blake wheeled round. An old, withered crone was standing holding the door ajar. She was ugly and evil-looking, despite the respectful leer on her face as she coaxed Blake to enter. He did not hesitate. Bowing to her ceremoniously he walked into the hall, and stood there as she bolted and locked the door, putting the key into her pocket afterwards, as Blake was quick to notice. Then, taking up a candle resting on the hall table, she led the way along a dark corridor and towards a rickety staircase. There she stopped and turned round, gazing furtively up at Blake.

"The good brother is tired," she suggested. "Would he like to go to bed at once or would he——"

Blake was listening intently. He felt certain he heard footsteps; that despite the lateness of the hour and the apparent silence, watchers were about and listening intently. But his face showed nothing of his thoughts.

"Thanks! I am very tired, and I would like to rest," he replied. "And I have travelled far, and hope that to-morrow I may be refreshed after the long journey. Do not trouble to call me early, Dame Morel. It is not necessary that I should leave before midday."

The old woman turned, and, holding on to the banister with a skinny hand, she began to climb the stairs. They creaked under her weight, and Blake as he followed felt a gust of wind, and a door above slammed sharply. Except for the sickly rays from the candle, all was darkness, and even when he reached a long corridor he could see only a yard ahead. The old crone walked to a bed-room in the middle of the corridor, and, opening a door, she stood to one side whilst Blake stepped in. Then she handed him the candle.

"But how will you find your way in the dark?" he asked.

"Ho, ho, ho!" she chuckled, in a voice that was meant to be friendly and reassuring. "I can manage all right! Bless your dear heart, I've lived here since I was a child! I know every plank of timber in the old house."

"Good night!" Blake said.

"Good night, brother!" she croaked back. "'Tis not often we are honoured by such an illustrious guest."

Blake closed the door. He heard the old woman creeping softly away, and then he looked round. There were no bolts to the door; the key was missing from the lock. Up against a wall was a large, four-poster bed, with other furniture to match in the room. The floor was covered with a faded carpet. The window was small and the sashes were made on the French principle. He laid the candle on the dressing-table and tried to open them. They were securely fastened! There was a door in the wall facing the foot of the bed, and he examined it carefully. It was locked on the far side! Clearly there was no means of leaving the house except by the way he had come. He smiled cynically as he stood again and looked around.

"A den of thieves!" he muttered. "And they have had no good motive in granting me their hospitality. Well, this is quite what I expected. I did not walk into the trap unawares."

He moved about the room for some time, as if preparing to retire to rest. Opening several drawers he finally came across a stout length of rope. With this he fastened the handle of the inner door to a hook in the wall, so that the door could not be wrenched suddenly open. Then placing a chair behind the door leading to the corridor, he drew forth his revolver, blew the light out, and took his seat on the chair. And there in the darkness he sat and listened.

For over an hour he could detect no sound except the gnawing of a rat in the wainscotting close by. Then the stairs creaked! He bent forward, every sense on the alert. The stairs creaked again, and again there was a prolonged silence. Then he knew that the door-handle had been gently grasped.

He stood up. After twenty seconds, that seemed in passing like so many minutes, the door was opened inch by inch from outside. Blake held his breath, till his heart began to jump like a sledge-hammer, fearing lest by his breathing he might betray his watchfulness. A round, bullet-shaped head was gradually protruded beyond the door, and Blake raised the arm holding the revolver.

Crash!

The blow fell, and Blake had gripped the villain by the throat!

CHAPTER 15.

Pedro to the Rescue.

BLAKE dragged him into the middle of the room and stood expectant. He knew that the attack would not end there. Almost on the moment a whistle re-echoed on the silent stairs, followed by the clatter of feet. The door to the left of the room was unlocked swiftly, and the handle was wrenched. And the pull was followed by a smothered gasp as the rope held taut.

Up the stairs with a terrific din rushed half a dozen men. The foremost were across the threshold before they had time to see Blake, standing intrepid with revolver levelled.

"Stand back, else I fire!" he thundered.

Too late! Those behind were pressing forward like wolves eager for their prey. Those in front were hurled into the room as they tried to steady themselves. The revolver barked twice, and the room became full of smoke. Blake was gripped, and he shook off his assailant. He was gripped again, and at the same moment the revolver was knocked from his grasp. He had reckoned on a stiff fight and had been prepared to meet it, but he had not counted on such desperate odds as now he had to face. In a few seconds the dark room was swarming with men. One tripped up over the taut rope with an imprecation, another cut it, and from the adjoining room more men swarmed out. And in the dark they fought like furies, striving to pull down their gallant foe.

Wrenching himself free continually, striking out with all the strength and science he possessed, Blake sent his opponents sprawling. But he was never free for more than a couple of seconds. Turning, dodging, vainly striving to beat back the crowd of ruffians, he gamely held his own for a desperate minute. Then he was swept off his legs, and as he crashed to the floor a score of hands pinned him down. Realizing that further resistance was futile, he lay still, husbanding his strength until the first opportunity should come when he could use it effectually.

"Hush!" a hoarse voice gasped, amidst the laboured breathing all around. "There has been no end of a row, and it's amazing that the folks outside haven't heard it already. Hold on to him; don't let him get away, but strap him up in silence. It would go hard with us, remember, if the villagers knew the game that we've been at."

Blake heard, and the words confirmed the suspicions he had formed already, and upon which he had determined to enter the inn. These men, without a doubt, were members of Lutzatti's gang. As such, they were not loved by the villagers. Should word spread that they were in the inn, they could hardly hope to escape with their lives. The rope was unhitched from the door, and his arms and legs were tied with ruthless roughness. Then he was lifted up and dragged down the stairs.

In the hall the withered crone who had given him admittance, was standing with a candle raised above her head, the better to give light to his captors. By that light he saw her ugly face, and the scowling features of those who held him fast. He was dragged along a passage and out into the yard at the back, and flung into a coach-house. And then the villains grouped themselves around him and one of them lit a lantern.

"Dare to cry out for assistance and that cry will be your last!" a powerful-looking scoundrel growled, as he looked down at Blake. "We know who you are, and why you have come here, though how you managed to find the way is past all thinking. You are no monk! We got the tip about that! You are a British detective—you dog!"

Blake did not reply. He knew that at that moment his life was hanging in the balance, and he had no wish to aggravate the ruffians, who had already been raised to a pitch of fury by the plucky fight he had put up. The marks of his fists were on the faces of several; the eyes of all were smouldering with hate and the thirst for vengeance. He lay still and waited.

"Better put him out of the way whilst we have the chance!" one villain grunted savagely.

"Ay! He's served me as no other man dared before!" another snarled. "Finish the job straight off!"

"Not here!" a third urged. "He'd be found for certain."

"And then there'd be the hue and cry!" the scoundrel who had threatened Blake explained deliberately. "No, no! He can't escape, and we can pay him out later on when we're far away. We've had our orders mind, and we must obey."

"Then why not get him out of this at once?" a squat, vindictive-looking rascal suggested. "There's time before dawn."

"We've no way of getting him along for one thing, and he'll be safe where I'm going to hide him," the other replied. "'Twon't be long now before the villagers will be up and about, and they'd see us as we passed along the road. Let you all scatter and go home quietly, except a couple. Three of us will be able to look after him. And be here at ten o'clock to-night. Then you'll get fresh orders. Meantime, do your work each of you, and don't bother about this cur."

The villain spoke with an air that showed he had a position of authority in the absence of Lutzatti, and after a slight hesitation and some grumbling his confederates began to leave. He beckoned to two to stay in the coach-house, and when the rest had left he closed the door. Pulling away a pile of straw in one corner, and lifting up some boards, he gripped Blake by the collar of his garb and dragged him to the hole. They lowered him, feet first, into a small cellar, and tied him to a staple in the wall.

Then, chuckling as they saw how hopeless was his predicament, they climbed up again to the coach-house, replaced the boards, and covered them with the straw. Surely it would be beyond the wit of man to find him there!

Blake did not stir for several minutes. He was exhausted after the strenuous fight, and his mind was busy—very busy. He had expected something like this, but scarcely quite so bad. Down where he was, six feet below the coach-house, a shout could with difficulty be heard. He congratulated himself on the coolness he had managed to display, for had he struggled when he had been overpowered, and, above all else, had he cried for assistance, he would assuredly have been gagged. And then his case would have been desperate. As it was he could but wait and hope.

Time passed, and there in the darkness, tied hand and foot, it was difficult to estimate the hour. With head raised and hearing attuned, he listened intently. His limbs became cramped, his head began to buzz, and his senses to grow dulled, for the cellar was very small and the air was rapidly becoming exhausted, but he fought hard to keep control over his nerves. Hours seemed to have passed, when at last he heard a prolonged bay, and drawing his breath till his lungs were full he shouted in a deep, stentorian voice:

"Pedro! Pedro!"

Again a deep bay rang out, and another, and another. They were followed by a tremendous growl and the stamping of feet on the boards overhead. Blake looked up desperately at the darkness. Would a light never shine? What had happened? He heard the noble hound snarling terribly; shouts farther off told of fury, passion, and surprise. But Pedro was still overheard; his challenge rang forth continually, with the same awe-inspiring volume. At last! At last! A board was wrenched away, and Blake saw the face of Tinker.

"Quick, you lad! I am here!" he cried.

"Great heavens!" Tinker gasped.

The lad pulled away the other planks and sprang down into the cellar. Whipping out his clasp-knife he severed the rope by which Blake was secured to the staple and the bonds with which he was bound.

"Hurry, sir!" he cried. "We may never manage to get out!"

Blake tried to rise, but his limbs were numbed. Overhead Pedro was snarling and baying, and the shouts of men were mingled with the cries of women. Blake slowly rose and sank back. Tinker clutched him by the shoulder and helped him to his feet. Then climbing out of the cellar he gripped Blake by the arm and helped him up, and after a desperate effort the latter managed to stumble into the middle of the cellar

Pedro was at the door. Outside were a crowd of villagers, gazing in terror, as well they might, at the formidable hound with teeth bared and eyes gleaming and body ready for a spring. The crowd was increasing every moment. Away down the market-place men were calling one to another, and the tramp of feet was increasing. Only the inn was strangely silent. There was no commotion there.

As Blake appeared, bedraggled, ashen pale, his garb covered with dust and mortar, a shout went up, a shout of consternation and wrath.

"A monk! One of the brothers of St. Benedict! Who has dared assault him!"

"Thanks, my lad!" Blake said huskily to Tinker, for his throat was parched. "I pinned my hope on you and Pedro. I knew that the good dog would find me out as long as I had not been carried away on horseback or in a cart. And——"

"You've been in a jolly big scrimmage, sir," Tinker cut in anxiously.

"But you don't look as if you had had any bones broken, thank goodness! How did the curs get hold of you?"

"I walked into the trap deliberately, and I learned a lot, and now I'm going to have my revenge," Blake replied. "Down, Pedro! Steady, old fellow! There are friends yonder!" And he patted the noble hound, who on the instant stopped snarling but stood erect and watchful by his master's side.

Blake walked to the door. The men lifted their hats and the women curtsied. Something more than curiosity was on the faces of all.

"My friends," Blake began, "you can see how I have been treated, and I feel sure that I have your sympathy. Is it not a monstrous thing that in a respectable town like this a stranger cannot enter at night and claim a lodging without being maltreated? Were it not for the intelligence of this noble hound beside me, I should never have been discovered in the dungeon yonder, where I was flung by a gang of ruffians till such time as they could work their evil will upon me. Are you men of Splugaren prepared to allow such things to happen with impunity? As respectable citizens do you not feel that cowardly acts of violence such as these must sully the fair fame of your town and demand retribution? Answer, for I rely on you! I claim fair play!"

A shout went up, and all surged forward.

"Who dared to assault you?" one man cried above the din. "Tell us their names and we'll make short work of them! They're not men of this town, I warrant; but even if they are, that fact won't save them! Tell us who they are?"

Men and women were thronging around Blake, shaking his hand convulsively. On all faces was the same expression, and it would have gone hard with any of Lutzatti's gang if they had been there at that moment. But they wisely had fled.

Blake raised his arms for silence.

"Wait here and let me rest for a few minutes!" he said. "Then we will go together and demand justice! We will go to the Mayor of Splugaren!"

CHAPTER 16.

Blake Denounces the Mayor!

THE crowd moved on either side, thus making a path through which Blake and Tinker passed. The indomitable detective strode in silence across the yard, and lifted the latch of the back door of the inn. The door opened and they tramped along the passage. There was no one in the rooms on the ground floor.

They went upstairs and flung every door open as they passed. Silence was everywhere. Blake stopped and frowned.

"They have all fled!" he said. "All except—ah, she must be hiding somewhere!"

He began to search more systematically, tapping the walls, pulling up the faded druggets, opening presses built into the walls. It was not long before he discovered that the house was honeycombed with secret hiding-places and corridors; that it was a fit nest for thieves and outlaws. He touched a knob hidden by wallpaper and a door swung open, and there, standing behind it, was the withered crone who had sought to lure him to destruction. When she realised that she was caught she gave a hoarse cry.

"Come out!" Blake commanded. "I will have a few words with you, Dame Morel, if you please. And you will do well to speak the truth. You can hardly expect mercy from me, but, for the sake of your grey hairs, I will be lenient if you do not practice further deception."

The old woman, wrinkled and seared, tottered out into the middle of the room, looking a pitiful object in the strong morning sunlight. Her hair was dishevelled, her clothes were dust-stained, her face and hands were black with soot and grime. Tears trickled down her evil face, and she held out her arms in an attitude of entreaty.

"Spare me, good sir! Spare me, I pray!" she pleaded. "I did but do the bidding of others of whom I live in dread. I am an old woman, and my life is one of fear."

"Where is the Mayor of Splugaren?" Blake began.

The old crone brushed the grey hairs back from her forehead and gazed in terror at Blake.

"He was here last night," Blake went on. "He rode up to the door shortly before I did. He was in the front room when I knocked, and at his bidding you extinguished the light. He saw that I was dressed as a monk, and as soon as he had noticed that, he told you to admit me to the house when he had left. The house at the time was full of scoundrels. You knew the fate that was in store for me, and you know, too, who the mayor is. You know he is Lutzatti."

As Blake spoke the old crone began to tremble violently. She was gazing at him in abject terror. As he mentioned Lutzatti's name she fell on her knees and bowed her head in her hands.

"You are a wizard!" she gasped. "You can read the thoughts of others. I will tell all, if only you will let me go free."

Blake bent down, took her arm, and lifted her up. Despite the great wrong she had done him, despite the evil stamped upon her face, despite the depths of degradation to which she had fallen, he could only remember at that moment that at least she was a woman and aged, and he paid her the respect due to her sex.

"Tinker, get a chair and let her sit down," he said. "She is badly frightened; she can hardly stand. Now, Dame Morel, you must see that it is dangerous to set your wits against mine," he went on; "I will know if you speak the truth or not. This is the meeting-place of Lutzatti's gang. Is not that so?"

She bowed her head in the affirmative.

"And the Mayor of Splugaren would not use this inn except that such a step is absolutely necessary. 'Twould never do, you know, that Lutzatti, the notorious outlaw, the freebooter, on whose head there is a priçe, should be seen by chance entering or leaving the mayor's house," Blake continued. "'Tis here, therefore, that he disguises himself when he rides abroad at night. Answer me, woman, and remember that your freedom depends upon your reply."

"That is so, good sir," she faltered.

"Then conduct me to the place where the disguise is hidden."

The withered crone rose slowly from the chair and groaned.

"He will kill me for this!" she moaned.

"Have no fear on that score," Blake replied. "He will not much longer be free to do evil to anyone."

She led the way out of the room and along the passage to a blank wall at the end. Without any hesitation she touched a spring and the door opened. It gave into a small room.

"Ah!" Blake said. "This is the door I heard slamming as I mounted the stairs last night. The villains were concealed here, were they not?"

The woman muttered inaudibly.

There was no window in the room, and it had been made by shortening the passage eight feet or so, so that without exact measurements of the house it could never be discovered. Blake touched the button of his electric-lamp, and as the tiny ray shot into the darkness, Tinker gave a cry.

"Great Scott! Look what's here!" he gasped.

The lad might well have been surprised. On hooks around the walls several garments were hanging. There was the native Swiss dress such as Tinker was wearing at the moment, there were the well-cut clothes of a city gentleman, the uniform of a cavalry officer, and half a dozen other disguises. Some guns were in a corner, a couple of revolvers were lying on a table, and under the table was a strong square box which Blake pulled out and opened without ceremony. Wigs, false beards, and other theatrical properties were in the box; also odds and ends of garments, and a few papers bound together by a strap. Blake seized the papers, pulled off the strap and examined them.

Banknotes, some of these for very large amounts, and of different nationalities, fluttered to the floor in profusion. He left them lying there and read quickly through the papers. Then, with a smile of complete satisfaction on his strong face, he picked up the notes, placed them and the papers in his pocket, and rose to his full height.

"Come, my lad, it is time for us to start," he said.

"You've found a clue, sir?" Tinker suggested.

"I've found enough to send Lutzatti to the gallows if capital punishment existed in Switzerland," Blake replied. "As it is, he will suffer penal servitude for life when we catch him. We'd better get off quickly. Our friends downstairs may grow impatient."

He tramped away, followed by Tinker, without a glance at the old crone who had listened breathlessly to his statement, and, hurrying to the yard, he cheerily addressed the good folk awaiting him there.

"Now I am ready, my friends," he began. "We will go to the mayor's house and we will go quietly. We will not disturb him by unnecessary clamour, and as he may be frightened at this unexpected crowd at this early hour, and, therefore, fearing hostility, may take to flight, I suggest that we surround the house before I demand an audience. Follow me now and don't make a disturbance on the way."

He walked out of the yard, crossed into the market-place, and he was followed by half the population of Splugaren. Calling an intelligent-looking man to his side he bade him show the way to the mayor's house, and they turned the corner round which Blake had seen the figure flitting the night before. They went down a wide street, turned another corner, and as they came to a well-built house, standing in its own grounds, a squad of gendarmes marched out through the gateway and barred the way.

The crowd gave vent to a cry, and Blake gripped Tinker by the arm.

"A clever dodge that of the villain's!" he said grimly. "But he's not going to baulk me. These fellows must stand aside."

He advanced boldly and an officer waved him back.

"Keep where you are!" he commanded. "You are not to come nearer."

"By whose orders?" Blake cried, still advancing.

"By the order of the Mayor of Splugaren," the other rejoined.

Blake pointed to the crowd who were pressing after him.

"Those men are citizens of this town. They have a right to see their mayor on business. They have come here for the purpose of making a grave complaint. It is his duty to see them."

"It is my duty to obey his instructions," the officer retorted.

"Then we are going to see him!" Blake replied. "Come on, men! Follow me!"

He dashed forward. Right past the officer he sprang, Tinker by his side, and Pedro, to the terror of the gendarmes, leading by a couple of yards when he saw Blake full of fight. The gendarmes were drawn in a line across the road. Pedro knocked one sprawling, ran a couple of yards and wheeled round. Blake flung another to the ground in his stride, and Tinker nimbly dodged over the body of the man Pedro had floored. They dashed in through the gateway and up towards the house. Behind they heard the rush and scuffle of feet, sharp, passionate cries, and the clatter of sabres. On they ran, and finding the door closed, Blake flung a window up and jumped into a well-appointed room.

Pedro wriggled in after him, brushing Tinker aside, and kept close to Blake. The detective dashed from room to room. He met some women who shrieked with terror; he was faced by a man whom Pedro sent headlong, and he dashed up the stairs. The rooms there were ajar, and empty, and as he stumbled down the stairs again he collided with Tinker, climbing up.

"To the yard!" Blake shouted. "He's bolted for his life!"

He dashed out beyond the back of the house. The stable door was open, and it, too, was empty. Running out into a paddock, he saw a wide stretch of country, and a horseman galloping furiously along the road half a mile away. He seized Pedro by the collar, pointed out the fugitive, and patted the noble hound.

"After him, Pedro!" he shouted. "Bring him down, good dog!"

The noble hound raced away. Meantime the uproar around the house had increased, and Blake, panting after his exertions, ran out towards the road again.

"These good chaps are putting up a big fight! It's useless now, and there may be serious mischief if it continues!" he cried, as he started to run. "We must stop it if we can."

But in the street the townspeople were fighting furiously with the gendarmerie. Blows were falling fast, some men were on the ground; every moment passion was growing stronger, and it looked as if the gendarmes would be swept away before long.

Blake dashed forward, past the gendarmes, and shouted stentoriously.

"Stop!" he thundered. "I have been to the house! Stop, and listen to me!"

Standing there in a monk's robes, with hand uplifted, with face handsome and strong, he made an unexpected and dramatic picture. For one moment the contest wavered, and he took quick opportunity of the chance.

"Stop!" he urged again. "I have something to say!"

The officer commanding the force stepped to his side, prepared to arrest him.

"The mayor has fled!" Blake began. Amazement was on every face. "He has fled because he is a criminal!" Blake continued. "What I have said I can prove, and I will do so shortly. Men of Splugaren, do you know that your mayor is the outlaw Lutzatti?"

CHAPTER 17.

Lutzatti at Bay.

A LOUD chorus of laughter from the gendarmerie followed Blake's statement, whilst the crowd of townsfolk, incredulous but curious, pushed closer. The officer tapped Blake on the shoulder.

"Come, my man, this won't do!" he said curtly. "We have known our mayor for years, and he is universally respected. What you say is worse than nonsense. It is a gross libel on an upright, honourable gentleman. You will come with me to the police-station. I charge you with instigating a riot. And there is something else besides. Good people of Splugaren," he went on, addressing the excited townsfolk, "you have heard what this madman has said. He has defamed our mayor. By doing so he has insulted you. I think that by this time you must feel remorse for allowing yourselves to be led into mischief by an agitator who is not even one of our countrymen. You would do well to disperse, and go to your homes peaceably, for you have broken the law, and if you do not obey my command the consequences will be serious for all of you. I know how it was that this man was able to play upon your feelings and lead you astray. It is his garb that gained your respect. But what do you think of him now when I tell you that he is wearing it under false pretences, and that he is not a monk?"

A hoarse cry arose as the officer concluded. Till this moment indignation on Blake's account had been on every face. The transition was swift. Now every face in the crowd was dark, every eye flashed wrath, every arm was uplifted against the man whose magnetic power had dominated them till this moment.

Tinker drew close to Blake. Of all there, the great detective was the only one who was cool and collected.

"Swiss gentlemen do not judge before they have heard the evidence on behalf of the accused, and I am sure that you men of Splugaren are not going to condemn me until you have heard what I have to say," Blake replied, speaking in a ringing voice that carried to the farthest fringe of the crowd. "You have seen how I have been maltreated, though this officer and his subordinates know nothing about that. Even the Swiss police are not always to be found where they are most needed. You saw that I was immured in a dungeon; you saw that it was only owing to my young friend at my side and the noble hound that accompanied him that I escaped a horrible death. Do you think that I jeopardised my life through folly? You know well that I could not have got myself into the predicament in which you saw me by my own exertions if I wanted to. I could not bind myself, and lower myself beneath a trap, and cover the place, and put a pile of straw upon the top. I came into your town a stranger, and this is the treatment I have received. It has been the work of villains. And instead of hurrying to arrest the criminals, this officer now talks of incarcerating me."

Again the fickle crowd wavered as large groups of people invariably do when puzzled by contradictory statements. The officer had been taken aback as Blake spoke. He knew nothing of the treatment the great detective had been subjected to at the inn; he had acted as was reasonable and proper under the circumstances, as he had been acquainted with them by the mayor. He was a trifle dull and precise, but honest at heart, but he had one direct duty to perform, and he never flinched from obeying his orders. He had been told by the mayor that Blake was a suspicious character masquerading as a monk, and to arrest him without delay. He meant to carry out that order.

"Do you deny that you are not a monk?" he demanded.

"No," Blake replied. "I am a detective, and I have been busy hunting down Lutzatti!"

The gendarmes laughed scornfully again.

"Enough of this!" the officer said. "Will you come to the police-station quietly, or must I use force?"

"Neither course is necessary," Blake rejoined as he drew forth his card-case from under the folds of his garb. "There is my card! My name is well known to the police of all nations, and perhaps even you have heard it before now."

He handed the card to the officer, who gazed at it with a surprise he could not conceal.

"Mr. Sexton Blake, of London!" he murmured.

"Yes, here on urgent business, and wearing a disguise, as I have often had occasion to do before," Blake went on. "Meantime the criminal is escaping. If he is successful in that, I will report to the authorities in Berne that he has got away solely through your obstinacy, now that you know who I am. You can act as you think well, and I will go with you where you like, but, mark my words, the consequences will be most serious for you if you delay me a moment longer."

The officer was staring in bewilderment at Blake.

"I am more than amazed!" he gasped. "Of course, I have heard of Sexton Blake! And you say that you are this most extraordinary man? And you say that you are hunting down Lutzatti? Truly, Sexton Blake of all detectives would be the man for that most desperate job! Yet you talk of our mayor as being Lutzatti! How can I believe that?"

"The proof is close at hand, and now that your tone is changed I don't mind taking you into my confidence," Blake replied. "This lad by my side is my young assistant, of whom also you have probably heard, for his name has often been mentioned in the papers. I will accompany you back to the inn, for my horse is there, and I must push on at once. But he will show you there a secret room full of disguises, and in his presence the old woman Dame Morel will not dare to deny that Lutzatti was there last night, and that he and the Mayor of Splugaren are one and the same. Come! Decide now what you will do. I will not urge you further."

The gendarmes had surrounded Blake when they had heard his name—not in order to prevent his escape, but impelled thereto by an overpowering interest. The townspeople had grown quiet; the swift change in the officer's appearance and manner had produced its effect on them; they saw that he had dropped his high-handed tone.

"All right," the officer said. "I am taking a big risk either way, but—but——"

"But you are wisely choosing the least," Blake cut in. "In doing that you are showing your sense. Nothing could be as bad for you as if Lutzatti escaped through your folly. He has got a long start already through this, but I won't hold you culpably responsible if you don't delay me any longer."

They moved off in a body, Blake, Tinker, and the officer walking in advance, and the gendarmes and townspeople forming a great crowd behind. They tramped along the road, and through the market-place, and up to the inn, and there Blake saddled and bridled the horse lent to him by the hospitable farmer, and rode away. Cantering along when he had got out of Splugaren, he turned on to the road down which the mayor had galloped, followed by Pedro, and found that it wound round the base of a hill. An ascent began when a mile from the town, and rising gradually, reached a considerable height, from which Blake could obtain a clear view of the country on every side. Neither the mayor nor Pedro were in sight, and Blake now held on for a couple of miles across a level road. It separated into two when he reached a corner, and here he dismounted and closely examined the ground.

His keen eyes soon detected the imprint of recent horsehoofs rising the hill, but it was only after very close searching that he saw the marks of Pedro's paws in the same direction. Jumping into the saddle again, he rode on. And now the road became more rough and steep every hundred yards. Gradually it turned into a rugged path, and after he had climbed for another hour, it was only a rock-strewn track. The horse he had been riding was exhausted by this time, and the track every yard grew worse.

Blake dismounted, and tying the bridle to a branch, he pushed on on foot. Before him lay a high mountain, its uppermost peaks white with snow. He walked briskly for a couple of hours, sometimes scaling steep rocks, sometimes crossing small plateaus, and he got half-way up the mountain without great difficulty. From that on, the climb was arduous and frequently dangerous, as he left ridge after ridge behind. At last he came to an almost perpendicular wall of granite rising to a height of several hundred feet, and he began to walk round the base in search of a spot where he could continue the ascent. He had gone a couple of hundred yards, when he saw something amongst a pile of stones. At first he crept cautiously towards it, then he stopped, laughed heartily, and whistled. The black object sprang into action; Pedro came bounding towards him

"Good dog! Clever old dog!" Blake said, as he patted the noble hound, which showed its intense joy at meeting its master again. "You deserve a big meal, old fellow, but like myself, you must wait until this job is finished. So the scoundrel got away from you here? You couldn't climb up that crag—eh? Well, I hope I won't find that it will be too much for me, too."

He walked on to where Pedro had been lying, and looked up the face of the cliff. A hundred yards higher up a big ledge of rock was projecting. There were sharp flints, and occasionally a stunted furze-bush, which a man might grasp on the way up, but, of course, Pedro had been unable to climb farther. On beyond the projecting rock the huge mountain ran seemingly up to the sky, and was covered in perennial snow.

"Lie down, Pedro! Wait here till I return," Blake commanded, as he walked towards the cliff.

Pedro understood, wagged his tail, and sat down, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, and his bloodshot eyes alight with intelligent interest as Blake began the ascent. The noble hound had tracked his quarry thus far; he knew that his master was going after him now. And Pedro was always disappointed when a hunt came to naught. He liked the satisfaction of success.

Blake climbed from rock to rock, finding the task none too easy. Sometimes he stopped and rested; sometimes he had to exert all the strength of his wrists and fingers to hold on to the scanty grip he was able to obtain. In that protracted and most dangerous ascent he had an instance of Lutzatti's daring and doggedness and muscular power, which was not lost upon him. He hoped to come up with the scoundrel before long, and he could estimate what sort of reception he was likely to receive there out in the wilds from a man tracked and hunted down, a man at bay, and apparently as powerful and as perfectly in condition as himself.

"And I suppose they thought that the Mayor of Splugaren was an easy-going, flabby sort of gentleman!" Blake muttered, as, with shins scraped and fingers numbed, he struggled on. "Little they knew him! Now I'm about to see the villain as he really is."

He was close to the edge of the projecting rock, which when close at hand stretched out like a table from the side of the mountain. He had purposely climbed up underneath it, so that anyone standing on the top could not notice his ascent. Now he worked round by the side. At last he got his fingers on the top of the rock, and drawing himself up he looked the length of the small ledge. A man was standing there at the entrance to the cave and his head was turned in the opposite direction to Blake. That man was Lutzatti!

Blake dragged himself on to the plateau, and as if instinct had warned him of the approach of an enemy Lutzatti wheeled round. And there, eight thousand feet above the plains below, both men faced one another, and they both knew that one or both might die.

"Surrender!" Blake thundered.

But Lutzatti pointed to the terrible void beneath and laughed mockingly. It was a challenge for a fight to the finish!

CHAPTER 18.

A Fight and What Came of It.

LUTZATTI stood still as Blake advanced. The notorious bandit was smiling, showing his white teeth, but his lips were drawn hard. His eyes were glittering. His voice was mocking as he spoke.

"So you've come all this way to visit me, Mr. Sexton Blake?" he sneered.

"I've come to arrest you!" Blake replied.

"I've no intention of surrendering!"

"I did not expect that you would," Blake rejoined. "All the same, I mean to take you!"

Lutzatti shrugged his shoulders.

"Then do your best!" he scoffed.

Blake stopped when a couple of yards from the desperate villain, and both gazed into one another's eyes. Each was awaiting an attack. Suddenly Blake sprang forward, and Lutzatti stepped back along the ledge. But the astute detective had anticipated such a ruse. It was not his intention to grapple with the adversary at that moment. He, too, stopped.

And quick as lightning Lutzatti sprang forward. They closed. But Blake was not taken aback. The cave was on his left, and he was resting all his weight on his right leg. Bending his body as Lutzatti gripped him, he fell with the scoundrel underneath, and into the cave. Lutzatti was free on the instant; the man seemed to have not only extraordinary strength but wonderful nimbleness. He was out of Blake's clutches and a yard away, rolling along the cave as Blake tried to catch his ankle. They sprang to their feet and faced one another again, and now Blake was with his back to the ledge, and Lutzatti's form was partly hidden in the gloom of the cave.

Lutzatti sprang forward to hurl Blake out of the cave and over the ledge. The powerful detective had expected a ruse of this sort, and again he was ready. He could have jumped to one side, and, following Lutzatti up, he could have delivered a terrific blow at the back of the villain's head which would have sent him toppling over the precipice. But Blake always hesitated to take a man's life, even to save his own. Such a course was contrary to the great principle of his noble nature. He would run into desperate risks himself; for love of humanity and in pursuit of justice he would face death without flinching, but he would throw away almost any chance of his own safety sooner than hurl another to destruction. He chose the risk involved instead.

Therefore, as Lutzatti, vindictive and devoid of human feeling, sprang forward, Blake turned, and as the villain staggered past, unable to stop himself, Blake struck out and landed his left full on the villain's ear. The latter banged up against the wall, steadied himself, closed again with Blake, broke away, and dashed down the cave. And Blake went after him, walking deliberately.

The farther he went the darker the cave became. He could hear the scoundrel's footsteps, but he could not see him. At any moment Lutzatti might seize a weapon, a revolver or a dagger, and renew the attack. Blake took out his pocket electric lamp, touched the button and stared ahead. Lutzatti had disappeared! The resolute detective walked on until he reached a corridor branching to left and right. If he went down the wrong way the villain might yet escape; he might rush out of the cave, descend the mountain, and get away. Blake had no intention of being baffled by any such strategy.

Bending down, he gathered a pile of brushwood together and set fire to it. Then hurrying back to the ledge he stood with his back to the mountain and waited. In ten minutes' time the smoke did its work. Lutzatti, gasping for breath, stumbled out into the open air, and Blake, grasping him swiftly by the back of the neck, flung him down and knelt on his chest. The villain, still with a gleam in his eyes, gazed up at him searchingly. Blake slipped a pair of handcuffs over his wrists and jumped to his feet.

"Well, and what do you mean to do next?" the villain scoffed.

"To leave you here until I get assistance, so that I can lower you to the ground," Blake replied. "If you care to roll over the ledge in the meantime that will be your own business. But I don't think that you will be such a fool!"

"You are a very clever man, Mr. Blake," Lutzatti replied calmly, "but on this occasion you need not pride yourself on success. I have expected something of this sort ever since I heard that you were on my track. I give you the credit of great astuteness; you seldom fail in detective ability. I felt sure that you would come up with me sooner or later, so I arranged a counter move. I think you had better release me, and in that case I will allow you to go without a further struggle. As perhaps you have heard already, I have earned the reputation of keeping my word whenever I make a threat or give a promise."

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"I have nothing further to say," he replied.

"All right! Then before you leave let me give you one piece of information which will interest you, I am sure," Lutzatti continued, and the baneful smile was still on his face. "Your young friend Robert Benton is being carefully guarded by my companions, and they have their instructions from me. This is a very serious business for him. I am sure you do not want his death to lie at your door!"

Despite the great self-control which Blake had acquired in years of hardship and peril, this ominous statement caused him to start. Already he had had ample proof of Lutzatti's cunning, and the calmness of the scoundrel in the terrible predicament in which he now was placed had been disconcerting to the brilliant detective, who was so quick to read the thoughts of others. And Lutzatti had noticed the swift though transitory change of expression on Blake's face, and now was chuckling softly. Blake looked down at him steadily.

"You understand, I am sure! There is no need for me to say more!" the villain suggested. "Come! I hold the trump card! A wise man always admits when he is beaten!"

"You mean that Robert Benton's life will be forfeited if I don't release you?" Blake asked firmly.

"I mean that he will die for certain, if I am not at the spot where he is held prisoner within the next forty-eight hours!" the villain replied savagely, for Blake's coolness had aroused all the worst that was in him. "Choose, therefore, which way you like!"

"And why should his life be taken if you do not intervene within that time?" Blake demanded.

"Because, as a safeguard to myself, I have arranged it so," Lutzatti replied hotly. "I tell those who are guarding him when to expect me, and if I do not turn up then, they know that I must be a prisoner, for, under other circumstances, I would, at least, send a messenger. That is the way I have dealt with all my prisoners until their ransom was paid, and I set them free, and the rule holds good in his case."

"You have made the situation quite clear!" Blake replied, with a quiet smile. And he sat down and coolly filled his pipe. The villain raised his head from the hard stone as best as he could, and stared at Blake. For the first time since their meeting an apprehensive look had come into his eyes.

"Well, what decision have you come to?" he asked, with a note of anxiety in his voice, after a long pause, during which, Blake had lit his pipe and was smoking placidly.

"You overshot the mark!" Blake said. "Robert Benton still has forty-eight hours to live, according to your own statement. So there is no need for immediate hurry!"

Lutzatti stifled an imprecation.

"And you think that you will find him within that time?" he scoffed. "Were you even to start now, and did you know the way, you would hardly reach the place where he is hidden in forty-eight hours!"

Blake had been waiting for an announcement of this sort. Now he stood up and walked into the cave. By the aid of his pocket-lamp, he searched it thoroughly. The passage branching off to the right ran for about seventy feet, and at the far end there were enough provisions to supply half a dozen men with food for a month or more. The left-hand passage was smaller, and there a couple of rough trestles had been rigged up. He went out to the ledge, dragged Lutzatti into the cave, and placed him on one of the trestles. Then, with a couple of small ropes, he bound him securely.

At first, the villain resisted vigorously, but, handcuffed, and in the grip of his powerful captor, he was practically helpless, and in grim silence Blake completed his task. Then, without as much as a nod to the baffled and infuriated villain, Blake left the cave, crossed the ledge, and began the perilous descent.

He reached the ground in safety, and, with Pedro at his side, he went down the mountain till he came to the spot where the horse was standing. Vaulting into the saddle, he rode away, and evening was closing in as he ambled through Splugaren and reined up at the inn. Tinker was in the yard, and hurried to meet him.

"Well, what news, sir?" the lad began eagerly. "I've been kicking my heels all day, feeling downright miserable, with you on the villain's track, and even Pedro in the fun, and I stranded here! Did you get any tidings of the scoundrel? But I suppose you haven't found much, or you couldn't be back so soon! And, I say, those gendarmes are a funny lot! They're all on your side now, and as keen as mustard to see you, and to find out what the game is, for they want, I suppose, to get a bit of credit for Lutzatti's capture! But I didn't give them any information. I thought it best to look solemn and keep my tongue in my cheek!"

"I'm glad you didn't tell them anything," Blake replied, as he jumped to the ground. "What about the old woman, Dame Morel? How have the gendarmes dealt with her?"

"She's scared out of her life, and as civil as she can be," Tinker explained. "They've threatened to arrest her, but she's in the inn still. I think they're waiting to see you before taking any action."

"Humph! They're not going to see me to-night, my lad," Blake replied. "I don't want them to know for the present that I've caught Lutzatti!"

"You've caught him!"

"Hist! Don't speak so loud!" And Blake gripped Tinker by the arm. "Young Benton's life depends upon our silence!" he whispered. "Come into the inn, and we will have some supper, and then I must start on a long journey. And there are some papers that I must examine carefully. Lutzatti was clever for a rogue, but he talked too much. He gave me a clue!"

CHAPTER 19.

On Robert Benton's Track.

BLAKE and Tinker entered the inn, and when the old woman saw the celebrated detective she began shaking like an aspen leaf. Blake, not unkindly, bade her serve them with supper, and, anxious to appease him in any way she could, she hurried to the kitchen, whilst he sat down at the table and drew from his pocket the papers he had discovered in the secret room upstairs, and Tinker, eager to hear how he had caught the notorious bandit, leant across the table, waiting for him to speak.

But Blake did not speak. He began to examine the papers with the most minute care, and Tinker had to restrain his curiosity as best he could. Amongst those papers was a roughly drawn map, and Blake studied it for a quarter of an hour without moving. Then the old woman hurried in with a tray, and, replacing the papers in his pocket, Blake settled himself comfortably to enjoy the meal.

"I'm as hungry as a hawk, my lad!" he began, as he grasped a knife and fork. "And I suppose you are much the same. This sort of work may be full of anxiety, but, anyhow, it gives one a healthy appetite; out in the open air for hours at a stretch, riding in the keen wind, and climbing mountains is invigorating and no mistake. Yes, thanks. Cut me a hunk of bread. Dame Morel knows how to cook, if she hasn't many other perfections."

"I ain't hungry, sir," Tinker grinned. "I'd nothing to do all day but grub away. I don't know how it is, but when work is slack and the day is wet, or I feel dull, I seem to be able to devour food just for the want of something to do. But, Jupiter! I'm so anxious to hear all that you must have to tell, that I really forgot poor old Pedro! Look at him, sir! He seems quite hurt at my neglect. Poor old chap!"

Pedro was gazing in mild protest up at Tinker, and he began to thump the floor loudly with his tail as Tinker, taking a plate from the table, crossed over to the sideboard to prepare his meal. Blake laughed.

"Yes, he's done a good day's work, and he knows it," he replied. "You can give him a square feed, Tinker. It may be some time before he gets one again."

"Will we be on the move soon?" the lad inquired, turning his head swiftly.

"In an hour's time," Blake replied.

"And we'll all go together?"

"No."

The lad's face grew long.

"Seems to me, sir, I'm never to be with you now," he complained.

"You and Pedro are to follow me," Blake explained. "I intend to start off in search of young Benton, and yours may be the most difficult task. I caught Lutzatti to-day up in a lair perched on a mountain, and I've left him there bound hand and foot. I told you just now that he talked too much, and I will explain further. He has young Benton guarded, and he has made arrangements that the lad is to be put out of the way if he does not turn up at the rendezvous at a certain time. That's the way he always works, and thus if caught he always hopes to be allowed to go free, for his imprisonment would mean the death of his prisoners if their guard heard that he was captured. It is for that reason that I don't want the gendarmes or anyone to know what has happened. The news would spread rapidly, and we might be too late to befriend young Benton."

Tinker's face had blanched with horror.

"The cur!" he muttered. "He stops at nothing! But it's fairly cute, though it's a coward's trick! He doesn't deserve any mercy!"

"Yes, in his own villainous way he's fairly artful," Blake agreed; "but on this occasion he spoke too much, as I will show you. In the first place he said that Robert Benton's life would not be safe after forty-eight hours, and that it would take me all my time to get to his side in that time even if I knew the way. That means, of course, that young Benton is a long way off. Lutzatti didn't know, when he told me this, that I had discovered the secret room in this inn, and that I had been through the papers there. Amongst them I found a rough map in pencil which I have in my pocket, which shows the various lairs at which his gang are accustomed to meet. The reason he made that map is because the gang are scattered all over the country, and they can't come very long distances without arousing suspicion. So according as he wants to see a dozen of them, and I suppose also according as he wants to keep an eye on them, he goes to the district where they reside. In each district there is an arranged meeting-place to which they can proceed, and from which they can return in the one night. I have also a list of the members of the gang which I will hand over to the Swiss authorities when my own work is finished."

"I understand, sir," Tinker assented eagerly.

"Well, I have been studying that map in conjunction with Lutzatti's statement that it would take me forty-eight hours to get to young Benton," Blake went on; "and I believe that I can lay my finger on the spot where the lad is held a prisoner. There is only one district marked on the map that means a really long journey. So, you see, that in making that admission, which the villain did in the hope that I would liberate him, he talked too much."

"Quite so. He gave the show away there," Tinker grinned.

"Now for the other point," Blake went on, as he helped himself from the dish a second time. "Lutzatti also told me that the lad's life would be forfeited if Lutzatti himself did not turn up to time, or if, at least, he did not send a messenger. When I heard that I knew that I had a chance. There too he spoke too much."

"I don't quite follow your reasoning there, sir?" Tinker admitted.

"Why, I'm going to be the messenger!" Blake laughed.

"You! But will they believe what you tell them!"

"I'm going to give them a letter written by Lutzatti. I have his signature here, and can imitate it sufficiently to hoodwink illiterate fellows like these confederates he has. Anyhow, I'm going to try."

"You are going to walk bang into the midst of the gang?" Tinker gasped.

"Yes. I've told you often already, my lad, that I can only hope to rescue Robert Benton by strategy, and the moment has come for the attempt. We must rescue him altogether by ourselves. Were we to call in the assistance of the authorities we could crush the gang within three days with the information I now have, but Robert Benton would be the victim. So I am going into the lair as a messenger from Lutzatti, and you and Pedro are to follow me, and to put up as good a fight as you can on my account and for young Benton, if I come to grief. It is a big order for all of us, but our duty is clear and that is everything."

"Of course it is," Tinker agreed heartily; "and I won't be sorry to have a bit of excitement, either. Whereabouts is this place, sir, and how do you intend to get there?"

"It's forty miles from here, and on a road that a horse can't travel," Blake explained. "In fact, as far as a road is concerned there's none whatever. It will be a rough, arduous journey, and I mean at first to push on as hard as I can, for I don't know the obstacles that may be in my way. And it is because I am making such a forced march that I am leaving you to follow on. It's just as well I have to walk, for then Pedro cannot fail to track me down. And I don't want an experience like the one I had when I was lying under the coach-house yonder.

"Why? How is that? He found you all right?" Tinker said.

"Yes. And I felt almost certain he would, but at times my mind was in doubt. I rode part of the way, you know, and though——"

"He tracked you to the farmer's house, and the farmer told me that you had ridden on to Splugaren," Tinker chuckled. "So I came on, and when we got to the inn I set Pedro to work outside, and he soon did the rest."

"Quite so. That is what I expected. But if the farmer had been absent Pedro could never have found me," Blake replied. "For he lost the trail at the farmhouse. However, that won't happen this time. Now, my lad, I'm going to write that letter and then I'll make a start. Here! Look at that map, and study out the way I'm going. You'll find the lair on the left top corner of the map."

Darkness had fallen again by this time, and the streets of the quiet town were empty as Blake, bidding Tinker farewell, struck out on his long journey. Instead of crossing the market-place he kept along the road fronting the inn, and soon he was climbing a stiff hill. Leaving the road to his right after an hour's swift walking, he wheeled away across the scrub to the left, and set himself to reach a great chain of mountains twenty miles away. He reached the base of the middle peak before sunrise, and had climbed half-way up before he made his first halt. Sitting down, then, he enjoyed a light breakfast from a scanty store of provisions with which he had supplied himself at the inn before starting, and after a couple of hours' rest resumed his journey again.

He reached the top of the mountain, went down the far side and entered a regular network of hills and gorges and high peaks. Consulting his map carefully he picked his way along until he had arrived at a gorge which he believed, from the information in his possession, was to be the most direct route to his destination, and as the afternoon was closing in, he had passed through it and came out on a wild and bleak country on the far side. Thoroughly exhausted, and believing now that he had left the worst part of the journey behind, he ate a hearty supper and lay down to sleep. He was up and refreshed in four hours' time and on his way again.

And now his anxieties began in earnest. He found that he had to retrace his steps frequently, that the country was much alike everywhere, and, consequently, most deceptive, that continually he had been walking in a circle, and that the precious hours were quickly speeding away without any advance on his part. Jaded, stiff in every limb, disappointed, but never dejected, he kept on at the task he had set himself, and at last, to his great relief, his stubborn courage triumphed, and he knew for certain that he was approaching the lair.

Satisfied at last that he was up in time, and that now he could make a bid for victory, he again lay down to rest for a few hours, knowing that he would need all the activity of his mind and possibly all the physical strength at his command in the ruse he hoped to carry through; and when once again he continued his journey, he had only an hour's walking before he came in sight of the lair.

There it was, a hundred yards from where he stood, down in a small valley! A rough tent was pitched close to a large tree, and evil-looking men were lounging about.

And in that tent young Robert Benton, the lad who had been decoyed from England, and whom he had followed with such persistency and courage, lay a prisoner, the great detective felt sure, perhaps knowing the fate that would overtake him shortly if the villain Lutzatti did not arrive.

CHAPTER 20.

Hard Pressed.

BLAKE sat down and watched.

The moon was shining high in the heavens, the mountains around were sparkling in their snowy covering, every object in the glade was plainly discernible. Half a dozen men were grouped around a large wood fire, some sitting, some strolling about, and the flap of the tent was shaking in the breeze. Blake waited for three hours. Then he rose to his feet.

"Now for it!" he muttered, as he began to descend to the glade, quietly, steadily, and without the least effort at concealment. Such are the vagaries of fortune, that had he masked his movements his approach would probably have been observed; as it was, walking openly, he had reached the glade and crossed half-way across it before a shout notified him that he was seen. It was a cry partly of alarm and partly of astonishment, and as the villains gathered in a group they stared at him for several seconds in silence before a hoarse voice hailed him.

"Stand, or I fire!"

Blake stopped and stood with arms crossed. After a hurried consultation the bandits advanced in a body. He did not stir until they were only a few paces away; then he moved towards them.

"You know who I am!" he said. "I have come to demand the release of your prisoner!"

They saw his dress. He had played a bold card, for possibly they might be amongst those who had recognised him on the hillside the night he had left Drogen's cottage, or quite likely they might have heard that the great British detective was tramping the country in the garb of a monk. But his shrewd instinct had told him that they took him for a monk, that, therefore, they had been surprised at his visit, and he had quickly come to the decision to play this rolc. They gazed at him with evident respect; even amongst these hardened criminals the Brothers of St. Benedict were held in esteem for their good works amongst the poor.

"We have no prisoner," the spokesman replied civily; "and you would do well to return to the monastery. We won't attempt to deny who we are; evidently you have been told about us and thus have found your way here, but I warn you that our orders are always to capture anyone who discovers our whereabouts. The authorities have put a price upon our heads, and we must fight to protect ourselves. We are outcasts from society; every man's hand is raised against us; but we have never done anything harsh where the Brothers of St. Benedict are concerned. Go, then, at once and leave us in peace. Your promise that you will not betray us will be all that we will demand, though we run a big risk in treating you so generously. For we have our orders, and death is the penalty of disobedience."

"Lutzatti is your chief. I have just come from him. You lie when you say that you have no prisoner, for he told me that you have one!" Blake replied sternly. "Are you prepared to risk his wrath and send me away empty handed?"

"You have come from Lutzatti!" the leader cried.

"Yes, from Lutzatti, who is also the Mayor of Splugaren!" Blake replied. "Do you wish for more evidence?"

The gang gazed almost in fear at Blake, and then exchanged glances significant of overwhelming amazement.

"You know that!" the leader faltered. "But still——" And he hesitated for a few seconds. "Still, that of itself is not proof that we are to hand over the prisoner," he went on. "Lutzatti is more careful in such matters. He does not send a message by word of mouth."

Blake felt a great sense of relief as the villain replied. For some seconds he had doubted whether the man had spoken truth or falsehood; whether in fact young Robert Benton was in the tent or not. The great detective had now the last card to play; so far his scheme had worked out splendidly. With a smile on his calm face, he drew the letter he had written in Lutzatti's handwriting from beneath his robe and held it forth.

"Read that, and delay no longer!" he said. "I have a long way to go, and Lutzatti won't thank you if you parley further!"

The man took the letter, and all the bandits read it eagerly. Blake watched them narrowly. This was the crucial moment. They whispered together for a few seconds and then the leader turned to Blake.

"Step this way!" he said. "You are free to take the prisoner."

Blake inclined his head gravely, as if he had had no doubt on that question from the start. He followed the villain to the flap of the tent, and there the latter stood to one side. Blake passed in. The tent was in darkness, but he could see a rough trestle-bed on one side, and a figure dimly silhouetted upon it. The bandit was still standing by the door, and Blake did not dare to speak. Bending down, he touched the recumbent form. Then he almost jumped.

This was not the figure of a lad. This could not be young Robert Benton. A great wave of disappointment swept over the gallant detective. He had come all this way, enduring prolonged hardship and facing extreme danger, in order that he might save young Benton from a terrible fate, and he had failed. For time was speeding away swiftly, and before long the forty-eight hours would be over. And as Robert Benton was not in this lair, and as all the meeting-places of the bandits were so far apart, it was not humanly possible now to reach the lad's side in time to rescue him.

The thought was so appalling as almost to rob Blake of his self-control. With difficulty he stifled the cry that sprang to his lips; he had raised himself to his full height before he remembered that the bandit at the door could see every movement, and that to show surprise would be also to arouse suspicion. He bent down again hurriedly, his mind almost numbed by the shock, and his kind heart oppressed with a terrible foreboding.

The man on the couch had stirred. The bandit spoke.

"Look sharp and get him out of this!" he growled. "We don't want you or anyone else lurking around."

Blake stretched out his hand. It touched a rope. His mind was so full of young Robert Benton, his thoughts were so far away now from the tent and the prisoner and his own danger, that he was acting almost mechanically. But by a tremendous effort of will he pulled himself together. What ever the future held in store, here was work demanding immediate attention. Here was a captive, an honest man, no doubt, an unfortunate fellow who had fallen into the clutches of these scoundrels, one for whom, perhaps, wife and children were sorrowing—ay, and possibly a Britisher! To free him was the first essential. After that, and when away from the lair, Blake would face the new difficulties which had surged upon him.

He felt for the knot in the rope, untied it, and began to unstrap the captive. The man was largely built; Blake noticed that as he unbound his limbs and pulled the rope from around his chest. Then clutching him by the arm, he bade him get up.

"Come!" he said. "I am here to save you. Lutzatti has allowed you to go free."

The man staggered to his feet and bumped against Blake in the darkness. The latter walked out into the moonlight, and passed the bandit. The released prisoner followed, cramped and sore, picking his steps with difficulty, and behind him came the bandit. Blake walked on. He knew the scoundrels were watching, he knew also that not to show interest in the man he had rescued might arouse curiosity and even suspicion; yet what was he to say before them to a man he did not know; and might not the latter, by some startling question, give proof that would ruin them both? He tramped on past the group, past the fire, and for twenty paces farther. Then he stopped and turned round.

"Good heavens!" he gasped.

If he had been surprised before, now he was doubly amazed; if consternation had already seized him, now bewilderment almost froze the blood in his veins; if up to this moment his thoughts had only run on young Robert Benton, now he even forgot the lad momentarily in the confusion of mind the recognition of this man had occasioned. For he knew him. That was the extraordinary thing. He had seen him in London and spoken to him. Of all those he had least expected to see out in this vast and rocky solitude, the man facing him was the last. The burly, terror-stricken victim of Lutzatti's brutality was Datchford! Yes, Datchford, the solicitor who had called upon Blake in his rooms at Baker Street, and had told him that young Robert Benton had been shamefacedly robbed of his fortune, and that ruin stared Blake himself in the face.

They stared at one another. Blake stood like a statue; for a couple of seconds surprise had bereft him of speech. And Datchford's jaw dropped and his eyes grew glassy as he recognised the world-renowned detective in the clean-shaven monk who had rescued him.

"You! You!" was all Datchford could grasp.

His utterance was hoarse. Great beads of perspiration slowly gathered on his brow; he began to tremble as if stricken with illness; he gazed behind lingeringly, almost longingly.

But there was no time for speech. The bandits, amazed that these two men—one the rescuer, and the other the rescued—should thus face one another, and remain in an attitude of suspense instead of hurrying away, began slowly to advance.

Blake was overwhelmed with astonishment, that was all. His mind was working lethargically; all he realised was that Datchford, dressed much as he had seen him in London, was in this startlingly incongruous dilemma. But, hearing footsteps, he looked over the solicitor's shoulder, saw the approaching scoundrels, and was spurred to action.

"Come along, and hold your tongue!" he whispered hoarsely, as he clutched Datchford by the arm and began to lead him away. "Our lives are not worth a minute's purchase if these villains suspect that I have tricked them. Walk slowly, and lean on me. When we get out of this we can talk."

Datchford tottered by his side, breathing heavily, like a man on the verge of a fit. They crossed the glade, Blake not daring to look behind, not knowing the moment when a raucous command might bid them stop, or a bullet might whistle past his ear. They reached the mountain-side and began the ascent. Datchford could hardly climb; Blake had to drag him along. They had scaled about a hundred feet when on the silence a bugle rang out, and a stentorian voice echoed from the mountain-side.

"Stand to your arms! Danger is nigh!"

Blake looked in the direction from whence the cry came. Down the mountain-side some men were running at imminent risk to their lives, and one was leading them by a score of yards.

Blake pulled Datchford to the ground, crouched down beside him, and stared in alarm. He knew that figure. He felt certain that he could not be mistaken. But he waited until it should emerge on to the glade and come full into the light of the moon.

Nor was he kept long in suspense. Before Datchford had recovered from the fright of the yell, Blake had made certain. The man was Lutzatti!

"He has escaped!" Blake muttered. "One of his gang must have gone to the cave and released him. He has followed me on here. And I am handicapped by this coward at my side! Can we get away? That almost seems impossible!"

CHAPTER 21.

Datchford Bemoans His Fate.

LUTZATTI was running towards the fire, and his followers were streaming after him across the glade. Blake pulled Datchford to his feet.

"Follow me!" he whispered. "We must race for our lives!"

He pushed the cowardly solicitor up the mountain-side, and the latter stumbled on. Meanwhile Lutzatti, after a few wrathful shouts, had rushed to the tent, only to find that it was empty. He wheeled round, ran back to the terrified villains whom Blake had outwitted, and again demanded an explanation in sharp, angry words. Then the whole crowd surged across the glade in the direction the fugitives had taken.

That short respite had aided Blake to some extent, and if alone he would have been almost out of danger by this time. But Datchford was bulky, and cramped and terrified; his face was blanched, his teeth were chattering; he was stumbling slowly on, and all that Blake could urge, and all the assistance he could render, could not galvanise the coward into quicker speed. They were only half-way up the mountain as Lutzatti reached the base, and Blake knew they would be overtaken before they could reach the top. Yet he struggled on doggedly, game to the last, now dragging Datchford after him.

He could hear the shouts of his pursuers; he could see that they were spreading out so as not to pass him in the darkness. He knew that those who had been guarding Datchford would strain every nerve to pull them both down, for their own lives might now be at stake, so revengeful was Lutzatti when betrayed or fooled. Holding Datchford firmly, grimly resolved to save the coward or to meet the same fate, the gallant detective went up the mountain-side with painful slowness, whilst his enemies rapidly gained upon him.

Yet he had had a good start, and he made the most of it under the circumstances. The crest above was now only a hundred yards away, now seventy, now but fifty, and still they were ahead. Then a yell told but too plainly that Lutzatti had detected them, and bullets began to rain around the fugitives.

Datchford was panting hoarsely, his eyes were protruding, he was leaning heavily on Blake, and the latter was using all his strength, dragging him along almost as if pulling a dead weight after him. Yard by yard they got up, still unscathed. But now Lutzatti's figure was plainly discernible close at hand. The villain raised his rifle and fired with deliberate aim, but fortunately his arm was trembling after his exertions, and the bullet flattened itself against a rock a couple of inches from Blake's head. The other villains were closing in; some even were trying to get up higher than the fugitives so as to come down upon them from above. It looked as if death, or at least capture, was certain. Yet Blake doggedly held on.

And then a rifle-shot rang out from the top of the mountain, now so close to Blake, and another, and another. With a piercing yell, one scoundrel fell on his face; another shrieked that he was wounded. The fusillade continued; but Lutzatti cared nothing for that. On he came, a scowl on his sinister face, hatred for the man who had run him down two nights before blinding him to his own danger.

Blake stopped for a moment, picked up a stone and hurled it at the villain. It struck the rifle and flung it out of Lutzatti's grasp. As he stooped to pick it up a black object sprang past Blake and collided with the bandit. A hoarse bay re-echoed round the crags, and Lutzatti and Pedro rolled over and over together. Down the mountain they went together, the man shrieking, and the hound snorting terrifically. Down, and farther down, they went, and the fusillade above continued persistently.

"It's Tinker!" Blake gasped. "One big effort, and we are safe, Datchford. The lad will hold them in check."

The cowardly solicitor heard, and the news seemed to give him fresh strength. As the bullets had whistled around he had winced continually, as if struck; now he blundered forward, shaking himself free from Blake, and even leading the way. He reached the top of the mountain and made for a clump of scrub, but Blake gripped him and dragged him in a different direction.

"Not there!" he urged. "It's too near. They're bound to search around. This way—come along!"

They passed to the right of the scrub, and a voice rang out clear and cheery:

"Hallo! Hallo, sir!"

"Right, Tinker!" Blake called back. "Follow on with Pedro! Whistle for him when you think you can clear off safely, and he'll lead you to us! You've done splendidly to-night!"

"Peg away, sir!" Tinker called back cheerily. "'Twon't be long before I'll be after you. These chaps are taken aback, and don't like to face the music. I'll liven 'em up a bit again, and then they'll have had enough!"

The rifle rang out in quick succession, and Blake, running alongside Datchford, made for a great expanse of heather over a mile away. The veins on the solicitor's forehead were standing out like whipcord, his bulky frame was heaving, his breath was coming in hoarse sobs. He rolled along, too exhausted to speak, almost too blinded by his exertions to see where he was going. Once he stopped, but Blake quickly pushed him forward, and to save himself from falling he staggered mechanically onwards. At last they reached the heather, and when twenty yards beyond the border Datchford fell prone, and lay so.

"This will do as well as anywhere else," Blake remarked as he sat down and mopped his face. "We can see them if they follow, and we can retreat without being observed ourselves. That was a narrow shave. I didn't dare to hope that all would have turned out so well."

He gazed across the plain. Silence had followed the uproar. It was hard to believe that villainy was so close at hand. The night wind fanned his face, the great snowy peaks stood out in lonesome grandeur; Nature was at her best, and seemed in her quietest mood. If it was not that the unwieldy solicitor was lying at his side like a stricken bullock, Blake felt that the experiences of the last few minutes might have passed for a hideous nightmare.

Datchford turned his fat, solemn face, so grotesquely terrified under the light of the moon, that for a moment Blake chuckled. Then as quickly he grew grave.

"I had no idea that you were in this part of the world," he said. "Before leaving London I called at your house in Wandsworth, and I was told that you had gone to Paris. Why did you come here?"

"I came to save young Benton," Datchford replied huskily, burying his face again in the heather.

"And how did you know he was here?"

"I got news of Galard. I heard that he had come this way, and so I followed."

There was no time for further speech. Pedro was running across the plain, and Tinker was following him. As the noble hound nosed out Blake he would have bayed with delight had not the latter stopped him, and half a minute later Tinker, tired, but triumphant, sank down by his side.

"They're bowled out, sir!" Tinker gasped. "They won't follow us for a spell, anyhow. That cur Lutzatti is limping about, held up by a couple of his gang. Pedro gave him no end of a gruelling, I guess. But, sakes! Wot is this? Well, I'm blowed! Why, if it ain't the fat ole lawyer who called at Baker Street; and threatened me on the telephone! Now, how did the wind blow him here? You don't mean to say, sir, that he got into Lutzatti's clutches—eh? Ha, ha, ha! An' he's wearing patent-leather boots an' a frock-coat! But where's your topper, ole pal? Don't tell me you've lost that?"

There was a broad grin of delight on Tinker's face, and as he spoke Datchford turned his head and looked at him sideways. The merriment on the lad's features and the twinkle in his eyes were startlingly at variance with the lugubrious look on the solicitor's flabby cheek. He gazed with professional rebuke at the lad, then remembered the absurdity of such an action in his present plight, and scowled savagely. Tinker chuckled at him all the more heartily, and winked.

"Different from Fleet Street—eh?" he suggested. "You can't get a 'bus ride for a penny out here, ole parchment!" he suggested. "You'll have to toddle along on your fat legs, and sharp, too, unless you want Lutzatti to prod you in the back with a rifle! Oh dear—oh dear, wot hardships we swells have to endure! No clerks to bully, an' no big lunch in the middle of the day, an' no first-class carriage back to our suburban haven. Not even an umbrella if the rain comes on! That's gone astray with the rest of the luggage. Even six-and-eightpence wouldn't be much good to us if we had it; an' there ain't anyone to brush our clothes!"

He screwed his fingers into his eyes as he concluded, and Datchford kicked out savagely. Pedro growled, and the bulky solicitor tried to make his figure small. Blake had been gazing out across the plain, busy with his own thoughts, and he had not heard what Tinker had been saying. Now the great detective turned again to address Datchford, and a questioning light was in his dark, piercing eyes.

"How did Lutzatti get hold of you?" he asked.

There was a long pause before Datchford answered. He was rubbing his face with his handkerchief and groaning as if in pain.

"I was looking for young Benton," he said at last. "I was wandering about, hoping to find the lad, or to get some news of that villain Galard. I had no idea that you were in this neighbourhood, or I would have gone to meet you. And these scoundrels caught me, and dragged me before Lutzatti, and the villain took me a prisoner because I had no money, and he said he was sure from my appearance that I must be wealthy."

"You look like a millionaire now, anyhow!" Tinker grinned.

"And did you see young Benton, or did you hear anything about him?" Blake continued.

Again there was a long pause.

"Lutzatti didn't know anything about him when I was captured," Datchford replied eventually.

"And how long have you been Lutzatti's prisoner?" Blake inquired.

"Five days or more."

Blake looked out across the plain again. Then he shot a swift look at the solicitor, but the latter's face was hidden again in the heather. And at this moment Pedro, who had been lying down, stood up with neck outstretched, body tense, and tail straight.

"They're coming this way," Blake said. "We must retire farther, and then watch. Take Pedro by the collar, Tinker! If you don't want to be captured again, Datchford, you'd better follow us. I can't undertake a rescue a second time; I've other work to do."

CHAPTER 22.

After Lutzatti Again.

DATCHFORD struggled to his feet and followed Blake and Tinker, who were moving farther in through the heather. The great detective's face was thoughtful and a trifle stern. He walked on swiftly till he reached a small knoll from the top of which he could obtain a good view of the plain, and after standing there a few moments he sat down.

Tinker saw that Blake was thinking hard, so he did not interrupt his flow of thought, but took a seat on a stone beside him in silence, and Pedro, with one eye fixed on Tinker, curled himself up at Blake's feet. Datchford stumbled up after them and sank down on the heather, and presently Blake spoke.

"You said that Lutzatti was limping as if he was hurt?" he remarked.

"Yes, sir; he didn't look up to much."

"Humph! This is a bad business and a great disappointment to me," Blake went on. "I made certain that young Benton was in the tent below, and instead I found——" He pointed a trifle contemptuously at Datchford, and shrugged his shoulders. "I am more than uneasy, my lad," he went on gravely. "You remember I told you that Benton had only forty-eight hours to live if Lutzatti did not arrive at the spot where he is hidden or send a messenger? The forty-eight hours are up by this time. I am glad now that Lutzatti got free!"

"Why, sir?" Tinker asked, in some surprise.

"Because that shows that someone released him, and it's quite possible he sent that man on to Benton's guard to tell them not to harm the lad," Blake explained. "Somehow I feel that Lutzatti has done that. It's not to his interest to put the lad away. The villain is being paid for holding him a prisoner. Therefore, he'll keep him safe, if possible, in order to get the money. But, on the other hand, I may be wrong, of course, and I don't like to think what may have happened by this time. This suspense is far worse than actual danger. I mean to put an end to it to-night."

"But you don't know where Benton is," Tinker replied.

"No; and I might take weeks now to find him," Blake replied ruefully. "Lutzatti is at large, and he will keep the lad on the move. But we know a great deal more about Lutzatti than we did a few days ago, thank goodness! That, at least, is in my favour. He can't mysteriously disappear from this on; he can't go back to Splugaren; he can't play the double role of a respectable mayor and a notorious outlaw any longer. He must keep here in the wilds, or clear altogether out of the country. I can hunt him from this on from lair to lair until I run him down."

"Then what do you mean to do to-night?" Tinker asked.

"I mean to catch him whilst he's here and in a country where he can't use a horse, and I'll do it if I have any luck!" Blake replied grimly as he stood up. "And if I am successful—well, it won't be long before I get young Benton. I have made up my mind on a certain course, which I dislike very much; but there's no use discussing that until we have the villain. Now, we'll make a start. I expect they think that by this time we are miles away, and they have given up the search."

Tinker jumped up, and Pedro was at once on the alert too. Blake looked down at Datchford, who was still lying on the heather stretched at full length.

"Are you disposed to come with us, Datchford, and help us to catch Lutzatti?" Blake inquired.

The solicitor turned and gazed up at the indomitable detective.

"I'd go like a shot, only I'd be of no use!" he groaned. "I'm dead fagged, and couldn't walk; I'd only hinder you."

Tinker glared at the coward.

"Pitch us another yarn!" he scoffed. "You're shivering all over with fear. You'd walk as well as any of us if you thought there was a square meal at the finish!"

"If you refuse to come you'll have to take the risk of meeting these bandits single-handed!" Blake explained coldly. "We're not going to keep watch over you as if you were a woman or a child!"

"I'll chance meeting them; I'll have to risk it!" Datchford muttered. "Don't you see that I'm played out? I never thought I'd have to endure such a horrid experience as this!"

"I'm sure you didn't!" Blake agreed, with a smile full of scorn. "I can't quite make out why you came out here at all, but I'll find out some day, and if——" He turned away. His face was dark, his eyes were flashing. "Come on, Tinker," he said; "we are better without him! Get to heel, Pedro—good dog! We must go very cautiously."

He moved off across the bracken without casting another look at the bulky coward who still lay cowering in the bracken, and crossing the plain swiftly, he reached the mountain top and looked down into the glade once more. It was empty, the tent had gone, the bandits evidently had moved away. Blake and Tinker descended the mountain, and when at the base Blake spoke.

"You stay here, Tinker, and keep your rifle ready," he said. "I'm going to make investigations, and, for all we know, some of these villains may be lurking about, and may swoop down upon me. In that case, open fire on them whilst I beat a retreat. Lucky job you had that rifle, by the way. How did you get it?"

"I rode the horse back to the farmer, and I had a feeling that the rifle would come in handy when I saw it hanging over his fireplace," the lad replied. "He belongs to the Reserve, sir, like most of the chaps out here, he explained to me, and as he seemed a good sort, I told him we were after Lutzatti and that the rifle might be of service. When he heard that, he gave it to me like a shot, for he said that he owed Lutzatti and his gang one already for pillaging his farm."

"I see. Well, keep your eyes open now, and be ready to follow me if I beckon to you. I'll kick about the glade purposely for some time, so as to decoy these scoundrels into showing themselves if they chance to be about."

Blake walked forward, Pedro following him, and he made straight for the spot where the fire had been burning. It was now almost out; a few embers and a pile of white ashes were all that were left. He blew one of the faggots into a bright light, and moved up and down within the precincts of the fire, examining the ground carefully.

Tinker, watching him intently, saw that after some time he seemed to strike a trail. He went on in the one direction for sixty yards, came back a short distance, then turned and walked almost to the opposite end of the glade. There he stood for several minutes, and then hastily returned. He waved his handkerchief, and Tinker hurried to join him.

"Lutzatti has gone yonder away, and he doesn't seem to have many of the gang with him," Blake explained, indicating the direction in which he had been making his investigations. "There are the definite footsteps of a man who has been careful about his right leg, and who consequently has thrown his weight as far as possible on the left. We must push on at once, and don't forget that the villains are armed, and may open fire at close quarters."

They started off, and soon they had left the glade behind and were amongst the chain of mountains on the far side. The road Lutzatti had taken was easy walking, from which Blake inferred that a stiff climb was beyond the bandit's powers at the moment. They passed out through a gorge on to a narrow path with stunted trees rising to a great height and a trickling stream running to the left hand. Presently Blake, who had been following the track carefully, stopped and pointed towards the stream.

"He's badly crippled," he remarked. "He sat down there to bathe his leg, I suppose. I wonder, Tinker, if you could have hit him when you were blazing away from the top of the mountain? Anyhow, he's not one for much travelling afoot, and if we hurry we are likely to overtake him before he can get a horse."

Blake hurried on, Tinker and Pedro following close at his heels. The detective instinct was now uppermost. Blake was walking with head and shoulders bent, staring at the ground, crossing from side to side of the road just as Lutzatti had done, forgetful of all but the task on which he had concentrated his marvellous abilities, murmuring his thoughts aloud occasionally, sometimes chuckling, sometimes uttering an exclamation of disappointment when for a moment he lost the trail and had to cast around. They were going steadily uphill, and Blake did not seem to realise the fact. At last, when tired out, he stopped for a breather, and, looking around, saw that the lie of the country had changed altogether. He gave a start.

"You should have told me, Tinker!" he said reprovingly. "We can be seen for half a mile in any direction here."

"I didn't like to disturb you, sir," Tinker explained.

Blake had been gazing in every direction. As Tinker spoke he clutched his arm, forgetting what he had just been saying, and he pointed away to the left.

"A small light flashed up there a second ago," he said. "Did you see it? It went out, but—— Ah, there it goes again!"

Tinker rubbed his eyes, and stared hard in the direction in which Blake was pointing.

"I don't see anything, sir," he began. "And——"

"It's gone again," Blake interjected. "If the trail leads that way we are close to Lutzatti, my lad."

He looked down at the ground again, and began to move forward. Presently he stood on the road by the side of the stream and pointed across it.

"We must ford this, and cast about for the trail on the far side," he explained. "Lutzatti crossed here. His footsteps point towards the water."

"And that's the direction where the light flared up," Tinker replied.

"Yes, as I expected," Blake replied, as he splashed through the stream. "Come on! The ground here is soft. I see footprints already."

He was tramping along still, intent on following the trail, and Tinker, holding his rifle in readiness, gazed eagerly ahead. Pedro was becoming uneasy. With head forward and tail erect, he was slipping past Blake, when Tinker caught him by the collar. They went on thus for another hundred yards, and then the lad whispered eagerly.

"Stop a moment, sir!" he urged. "Is that a hut in the clump of trees straight ahead, or is it a group of cattle?"

Blake shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked long and steadily.

"It's a hut," he said; "and that is where Lutzatti is resting! It never occurred to him that we would have the hardihood to follow, instead of fleeing for our lives. He's there, my lad, too lame or wounded to get farther to-night. No doubt some of his confederates are with him, but I guess we're a match for the lot. The villain has escaped me once, but he won't a second time! I'll make sure about young Benton now. And woe betide the villain yonder if evil has befallen the lad!"

CHAPTER 23.

A Question of Terms.

THEY crept towards the hut, Tinker gripping his rifle, Pedro picking his way cautiously, and Blake leading by a couple of yards. They entered the clump of trees, and Blake walked round it. None of the villains were outside. He crept to the hut and looked in through a chink. The hut consisted of one room, Lutzatti was lying on a stretcher, and a couple of men were sitting before a small log fire.

Blake walked round to the door. Stepping back, he rushed forward swiftly, planted his shoulder against the door, and it sprang open. There was a hoarse shout and the stumbling of feet and the thump of stools against the ground as he tumbled in and staggered up against Lutzatti's stretcher. The villain, lying on the rough bed, had arisen, the two bandits by the fire were rushing to close with Blake before he could steady himself, when to their consternation a voice rang out sharply on the threshold:

"Hands up, or I fire!"

The bandits turned. Tinker, with rifle to his shoulder and finger on the trigger, had covered them. They stood aghast.

"Blaze away, my lad, if anyone of them dares to move!" Blake said coolly. "Pedro, come here!"

Pedro pushed his way past Tinker and stalked into the hut. His appearance at that moment was sufficient to strike terror into the hearts of the bravest. He was showing his powerful teeth, his step was soft and sinister as a panther's, his tail was standing out straight behind, and his bloodshot eyes were gleaming. Blake's stealthy approach towards the hut, and his swift and sudden assault had conveyed to the intelligent hound what was the nature of the work required of him, and he was ready to pull down the bandits there, one after another, the moment Blake gave the order.

The villains were paralysed with terror. The attack had been so swift and unexpected, Tinker's quickness had been so baffling, and Pedro's entrance so dramatic, that the fight had gone out of them. Lutzatti, leaning on his elbow, gazed with genuine admiration at Blake, and the other two scoundrels stood like a pair of schoolboys in disgrace, their mouths open and their eyes rivetted on the hound.

Blake walked to a corner of the hut, picked up a couple of rifles, emptied the magazines, dropped the cartridges into his pocket, and looked at Lutzatti. A wry smile crossed the bandit's lips.

"Checkmate!" he said, and, dropping back on the stretcher, he linked his fingers behind his head.

"You men go and sit in yonder corner," Blake directed.

The scoundrels, taking their cue from Lutzatti, grinned ruefully, shrugged their shoulders, and complied.

Blake seated himself on a stool and nodded at Lutzatti.

"Yes, I've made sure of you this time," he began. "Now what about young Robert Benton?"

The outlaw smiled cynically.

"What about him?" he asked in turn.

"Why this—that if anything has happened to him your last hour has come!" Blake replied, and he drew his revolver from his pocket

Lutzatti nodded. A questioning look had come into his eyes.

"And if the young fellow is safe—what then?" he inquired.

"In that case he must be handed over to me without a moment's unnecessary delay."

"I see," Lutzatti answered. He turned on his side and rested his head on his hand. "So you are prepared to make terms?" he suggested.

"Yes."

"You could have had the young fellow for the asking when you caught me up in the cave on the mountain-side," Lutzatti replied quietly. "I was in your power, and I did not hope to get free after you left me. By good luck a comrade came there and released me, of course. Why did you not make terms then?"

"I am loth to make them now," Blake replied, with a touch of scorn. "If you press for the reason I will give it."

"There's no need—I understand," Lutzatti replied nonchalantly. "Your opinion of me is not a particularly good one, eh? In fact, I am not the sort of man that you respect, and you don't want to enter into business dealings with me. All right; I don't care. Well, you are in the strong position at this moment. What terms do you suggest?"

"If it was my own life that was at stake I'd fight to the bitter end; I'd never demean myself by bartering with a scoundrel like you!" Blake answered so coldly, that Lutzatti winced for a moment. "Not only have you violated every right principle yourself, but you have dragged into your net many men, some of whom at least might have led useful, respectable lives if it was not for the terrorism you exercised over them. It has been my duty to meet and bring many criminals to justice, but I never knew a man more degraded or selfishly calculating than you. For the love of money you have deliberately turned to crime when you had enough as money goes, and an honoured position that most certainly you did not deserve. Yes, if it was my own life that was in danger you might do your worst and I would not parley with you. But I cannot allow that a young and innocent lad should be the sufferer. Therefore, I must stoop to a bargain with you. And the bargain is this—that if you hand Robert Benton over to me, I will allow you to go free."

"Until what time?" Lutzatti asked, gazing dreamily at Blake.

"Until next you and I meet!" Blake replied grimly. "And that meeting won't be postponed a day longer than I can help. When you hand over Robert Benton I will give you twelve hours' start. After that, I will try to hunt you down again when and how I like. Those are my terms, and it is for you to choose or reject them. If you decline you will be a dead man ten seconds after the words pass your lips!"

Blake's face was hard as steel as he concluded. His eyes were flashing, his finger was on the trigger of his revolver; that he meant exactly what he said was evident not only to the bandits but to Tinker, who knew him so well. This was a case of a life for a life. If Lutzatti refused to accept these terms the chances were a hundred to one that young Robert Benton would never live to return to Britain. From the start Blake had told Tinker that he could only hope to rescue the lad by strategy. Now the moment had come.

Lutzatti sat up in the bed and gazed at Blake as if he would read his inmost thoughts. For long seconds the two men looked deep into each other's eyes without flinching. Then with an impatient gesture Lutzatti sank back, his face pale but his eyes glittering venomously.

"All right, my British detective," he sneered hoarsely, "I won't forget how you have spoken to me! I can hate to the death, and I'll pay you out for those bitter words and that contemptuous manner! You hold a strong hand now, but my time will come—ay, it will come! So you will track me down again, will you? Perhaps there will be no need for that. It may be that before long I will be dragged to a dark dungeon and flung into it for life, but that won't be to-day or to-morrow! It is you I have to thank already that my identity has been discovered. It is you who found out that I was the Mayor of Splugaren, and it is you who have driven me from this time on to live in wild solitudes, hunted and harried like a savage animal. And that even is not enough. You will not stop even there. All right. Now I live only for vengeance! When I cry quits with you, the gendarmes can do their worst!"

"I shall be delighted to meet you when and where you like," Blake replied coolly. "Now about my terms. Do you agree to them?"

"Yes."

"Good! Where is Robert Benton?"

"That is another matter. I refuse to tell you."

"Be it so. How many hours must pass before he can be handed over to me?"

"Twenty-four."

"You can't have him here sooner?"

"No."

Blake stretched his legs, rubbed his chin, and smiled.

"I'm asking on your account," he explained. "Perhaps, on reflection, you may be able to reduce the time."

"What do you mean?" Lutzatti growled.

"Why this—that until Robert Benton comes you won't taste either food or drink!" Blake replied. "I don't trust you; I think that you are capable of any treachery. If young Benton is not delivered safely to me within forty-eight hours, you don't break your fast for that time; if by then he does not turn up—you die! That is all I have to say on that matter."

Lutzatti was glaring like a baffled tiger. The two other bandits, who had been listening intently all through the conversation, now began whispering together.

"You men stand apart!" Blake commanded sternly. "Now, Lutzatti, you'd better make arrangements for Benton's release. You are to come with me, and one of these scoundrels is also to be my prisoner. The other is to go with a letter directing the villains, mounting guard over Benton, to hand him over to me. Which of these ruffians do you choose?"

Lutzatti, still scowling, pointed to the tallest.

"Rudolf, you had better take the letter," he said.

The bandit nodded in assent.

"Now I may as well explain what the procedure is to be, for I have thought it all out," Blake continued. "I am going to take you away from here, Lutzatti, as soon as your envoy starts, and for the first five miles of his journey he will be accompanied by my young friend yonder, who will hold his rifle pointed at the back of his head all the time. In this way the rascal will be unable to discover where I have hidden you, and unable, therefore, to bring an overwhelming crowd of your gang to overpower me and effect your release. The other rascal in the corner will also come with me, and he will be in the charge of this hound, who will pull him down if he attempts to escape. As I will have to look after you, he and the hound must fight it out if there is a row—and I back the hound!"

Tinker, standing at the door, chuckled audibly, and the terrified bandit, who was to be Pedro's prisoner, glared at him.

"Your explanation is quite lucid!" Lutzatti said, with a wan smile.

"I'm glad you understand," Blake replied. "This rascal Rudolf is to return alone with Robert Benton. We will be on the watch, and if others accompany him we will know, and act accordingly, and both my young friend and I are excellent shots. He is to leave Robert Benton in the middle of the glade yonder and then to walk away. If he doesn't retire quickly we will send a bullet through his hat just to liven him up. When I am certain that young Benton is safe and sound I will release you and the other rascal. That is all."

Lutzatti nodded.

"It's enough!" he said curtly. "Some day I will have something to say."

Blake pulled his notebook out of his pocket, tore off a page, and handed it and a pencil to the villain.

"Write the letter now, and then we will start," he said. "The longer delay the longer your fast will be. As for your threats, I think little of them. Pedro, watch those men whilst I talk to Tinker."

CHAPTER 24.

Bob Benton Gets a Hearty Greeting!

UPON the side of a mountain, in a dense clump of trees and brushwood, Blake sat at the edge of a cave forty feet from the level ground and gazed out across a plain. The mountain rose thousands of feet, straight as a plummet line; before him a vast flat expanse of level country stretched out for a couple of miles. And behind him in the cave, bound hand and foot, Lutzatti and the other bandit lay, with Pedro watching them both out of bloodshot, sleepless eyes. Close on twenty-four hours had passed since Blake had captured them, and he was still waiting for the arrival of Robert Benton.

The great detective had not gone far from the hut after the rascal Rudolf had started on his journey. There had been no need for that, and he knew that even if Lutzatti's gang tried to hunt him down he would be as safe close to the hut as if he had journeyed half a dozen miles. Perhaps safer, for the gang would naturally conclude that he had travelled far so as to avoid discovery, and therefore, would search the outlying country before closing in on the spot where he had caught their leader. Now for the first time for many days and nights he was thinking of London. and of another aspect to this perplexing case. He had no further doubt about the rescue of young Robert Benton. He was wondering if he would ever be able to recover the lad's fortune.

Ay, the rescue of young Benton from the hands of a large and splendidly-organised gang of outlaws under the leadership of a villain as able as he was unscrupulous, was a task of immense difficulty, and one in truth which would have proved insurmountable to any man less daring, less experienced, less resourceful, or less of a genius than Blake. But to recover a vast sum of money which had passed into the hands of rogues was even more stupendous. He had to find the rogues first, and then he had to discover what they had done with the money. It might be lying in a bank in England, or it might be lodged in America, or Russia, or Japan. It might have been split up into half a dozen shares and be scattered in half a dozen directions. And if he did not recover the money—what then?

Why, Blake was liable, as trustee, for the full amount! He did not possess so much, despite the vast fortune he had made, for his heart had been as great as his mind. To befriend the helpless, to succour the weak, to lift the fallen, to defend the oppressed, all this had been the happiness of his life, and as he made money by hard and dangerous work, so he spent it lavishly on others. True, he could in some years time save sufficient to pay back in full what was due to Robert Benton, but Blake knew the world, and he knew that his character would be assailed by harsh critics before even he had time to defend himself; that false and evil interpretations would be put upon all his statements and all his actions; that possibly even after his brilliant exploit in rescuing young Robert Benton, there would not be wanting those who would hint that the great detective had been in league with the bandit, so impossible would it have seemed to some that one man could triumph over so large and lawless a gang; in fine he knew that disgrace stared him in the face.

It was a gloomy prospect, and Blake's intellectual face was shadowed in thought, as he sat at the entrance to the cave, amidst the moaning of the wind through the gaunt trees and the creeking of the branches, and gazed out on the plain. Through the tough struggle in which he had been engaged with Lutzatti since coming to Switzerland, some particular incidents stood out in his memory with exceptional vividness. Who, for instance, was the tall, thin man who had gone to meet Lutzatti? Who was the stout man who had taken Robert Benton to the monastery? Why was Datchford in this neighbourhood? And to whom belonged the banknotes which he had found in the secret room in the inn at Splugaren? They were in his pocket now! He took them out, and spent some minutes examining them carefully.

As he placed them again in his pocket-book, he looked across the plain, and the frown on his face gave place to a bright smile. Two lads were advancing towards the cave, both talking eagerly, and one carrying a rifle. They were Tinker and young Benton. Blake jumped up, descended to the level ground, and advanced to meet them. With a cry of delight, young Benton ran forward, and Tinker flung his cap into the air, with a loud whoop.

"Mr. Blake! Mr. Blake!" young Benton shouted. "Here I am, safe and sound at last, thanks to you! Tinker has been telling me all! What a brick you've been to risk your life for me!"

So impetuously did the lad rush, that he was up against Blake before he could stop, and the latter had to clutch him to save him from a fall. They clasped hands, Robrt Benton's eyes bright with joy, and that tranquil smile on Blake's firm face that showed the moment he was happy.

"Ah, Bob! Glad to see you again!" he said quietly. "Tut—tut! I'd have gone to the end of the world to release you! Why, lad, I'm your trustee, and that's the least I could do! There! Take a pull on yourself! I understand what you feel. It must be a great relief to get amongst decent folk again."

Hardship, privation, suspense, and cruelty, had left their mark for the time on the bright, courageous British lad. He was thinner than when Blake last had seen him, his cheeks were pale, a strained look was in his eyes, his clothes and boots were frayed and broken, and his nerves were so badly shaken, that now the danger was past, he looked as if he threatened a collapse. But Blake's strong voice, his hearty grip, and manly presence, steadied the agitated lad. With a big effort he mastered his feelings, and kept a straight upper lip.

"Game all through!" Blake murmured, as he read in the lad's face the story of his sufferings. "He has endured enough to sap the courage of a strong man, and yet he won't give in. He's one of the British bull-dog breed, and this cruel experience won't harm him; it didn't last long enough for that. But what is one to think of the scoundrels who could so ill-treat a lad for the sake of greed? My hand will fall heavily upon them before I am done! The sight of this young fellow's face has made me even more determined than before.

He had linked his arm through young Benton's, and was leading him to the cave, and Tinker joined them at this moment. He, at all events, was in the highest spirits.

"I've told Benton that Lutzatti is here, sir, and he says he'd like to give him a piece of his mind," he chuckled. "I do believe it would go a bit hard with Lutzatti if Benton squared up to him in a few days, when he's got into condition a bit. He didn't half talk to that ruffian, Rudolf, before we parted, anyhow! He made him fair wild, and Benton would have gone for him, too, only I told the cur to clear off!"

"You had no trouble, then?" Blake suggested.

"None in the world, sir," Tinker replied, with a merry grin. "You fixed up everything so well, that the gang knew there was no way in which they could lay a trap for us. And, it's my belief, they're not up to much in the way of villainy if Lutzatti isn't amongst them. He's their head-piece! The rest are all duffers! And, perhaps, they ain't sorry he's caught when all's said. Anyhow, they're fair scared at present."

"I dare say a good many of them would be very glad if I handed him over to the authorities," Blake answered. "He rules them by fear, and they may have had enough of outlawry. But I have to let him go, and the sooner we start from here the better. It won't be long before he'll be on our track, for he means vengeance if he can possibly manage."

"You intend to release him, Mr. Blake?" Robert Benton gasped.

"Yes, Bob; that was the promise I made on condition that he handed you over to me, and, of course, I must keep to my side of the bargain."

"Of course!" Bob Benton assented. "But you'll go after him again, won't you, and you'll let me come with you, and share the danger, won't you?" the lad urged.

"I'll clap him into gaol yet, if I possibly can," Blake replied grimly.

As for you helping me, you must get strong again, that is the first thing, my lad. Don't worry about Lutzatti at present. You can leave him safely to me."

They climbed up to the cave, and tramped in. Pedro thumped the ground with his tail by way of welcome; then he got up, walked sedately to Bob Benton, and rubbed his cold nose against the lad's hand. It almost seemed as if the clever hound understood all that had happened, and realised that the captive had been released. Lutzatti, lying on his back, smiled cynically, as he eyed young Benton, and coolly nodded. The lad turned on his heel and began to pat Pedro.

Blake loaded the two rifles he had taken in the hut when he had captured the villain, and handed one to Bob Benton.

"That's for you," he said, "the other is for my use, and Tinker is already armed. I don't think your gang, Lutzatti, are so courageous, even with you to lead them, that they will attack us, with three rifles and the bloodhound. Now you and that other rascal can get up. I promised to release you, and I am going to do so, but there the compact ends between us. If you don't slink off at once, I'll chuck you out of this!"

He unbound the villain and dragged him to his feet. Lutzatti's face had flushed crimson as Blake spoke, and now, scowling savagely, he shook his fist at him, and lurched towards the mouth of the cave. There he stopped, and turning, he shook all over with passion, and his voice vibrated hoarsely.

"I'll pay you out, and then I don't care what happens!" he growled. "Mark my words! I'll pay you out!"

Muttering imprecations, he blundered down to the plain, and Blake, having released the other bandit, watched them both hurrying away. A smile was on his lips.

"Come, lads! We've all had enough of a rough life for a spell!" he suggested. "A comfortable meal, and an iron bedstead, are not bad things when one has been living out of doors in all sorts of weather! We'll make tracks for the monastery at once. There we are certain of a hearty welcome and kindly hospitality. Shoulder your rifles, and come along!"

They tramped out of the cave, Pedro baying with delight as he got a taste of freedom again, and Tinker whistling merrily, and they began the long march back. They did not meet with any adventures, for, as Blake had shrewdly predicted, the bandits did not dare to molest them, and in thirty-six hours from the start, after several rests on the way, they reached the monastery, to the delight of the good monks, who had become anxious at their long absence.

"Ah, Brother John! What can we do for you?" one cried.

"A tub and a square meal, if you please, Brother Francis!" Blake replied cheerily. "And then a twelve-hour snooze, and we'll all be as fit as fiddles!"

CHAPTER 25.

Back to London.

TINKER and Bob Benton were engaged on a hearty breakfast, when the door opened and Blake entered the room. Both lads uttered an exclamation of surprise, and Blake smiled. The great detective had discarded the garb of a monk, and was in his workaday tweeds, which set off his athletic frame to perfection. His strong face was as hard as nails, his dark eyes shone with the clearness of perfect health and training, his broad shoulders gave a suggestion of superb strength, and the muscles on his arms and legs bulged out in lines along his clothes.

Tinker began a tattoo with his knife and fork upon the table, and Bob Benton jumped to his feet, nearly upsetting his chair in his delight.

"You seem your old self, just as when I last saw you in England, Mr. Blake!" he cried. "Somehow you didn't look half as strong in the other dress. It reminds a chap of home to see you in those togs. I suppose now you are going to take a holiday after all your hard work?"

Tinker was plying his knife and fork rapidly again as he chuckled heartily.

"Better than that!" he suggested, with a twinkle in his eyes. "There ain't much of a holiday for us, young fellow! Heigho, for merry London! When do we start, sir?"

"We're going home, then!" Bob Benton cried.

Blake had seated himself at the table, and had raised a dish-cover.

"Tinker has hit the nail on the head," he said. "Ah! Ham and eggs, cold fowl, honey and marmalade, home-made bread, and fish and fruit! The good monks live very frugally themselves, but they are hospitable to others, most certainly. Yes, we start for London almost at once; but you must stay here, Bob, for the present. Rest assured it won't be long before either I return or send for you."

Bob Benton's face showed his disappointment.

"You can't take me with you?" he said.

"No, my lad. I don't know how long we may be in London, for one thing. Just as likely as not we may have to start off somewhere after a few hours there, and you need complete rest, and I must have my hands free, too. You will be quite safe here, and the monks will look after you in every way. I have just seen the Prior, and he is delighted to have you as a guest. The best way you can help me just now is by doing all you can to get strong. So don't feel downhearted. We'll all be together again before long."

"All right, Mr. Blake," the lad agreed. "I'd like to go with you, of course, but I'll say no more, and I won't worry. But I'll be jolly glad when I see you again. You can bet your life on that!"

Blake began his breakfast, and for some minutes there was silence. Then he looked across at Bob Benton, and began to question him.

"Now that we are all rested, there are a few questions that I'd like to ask you, my lad," he began. "In the first place, who brought you here?"

"A man called Sinclair Bevan," Bob Benton replied..

Blake dropped his knife and fork, and gazed at Benton. There was no mistaking that look; the great detective had been taken aback.

"Sinclair Bevan!" he repeated. "I am more than surprised. What was he like?"

"He's a stout chap, sir, about fifty years of age, and he's got an oily manner; but he befriended me, and it's only after Lutzatti caught me that I began to have my doubts about him."

Blake pondered for a few moments.

"How was he dressed?" he asked.

"In tweeds and a cap and thick boots," young Benton explained.

Again Blake continued his meal in silence.

"How did you come across him? Tell us how you were kidnapped, and all that happened afterwards," he suggested.

"We were coming back from the football-field, and I was one of the last," the lad began, "and when I got to the shrubbery close to the college I saw a man called Curling there. Curling is a fellow who does a lot of work about the place, and we all know him and make fun of him at times. He was standing in the shrubbery. I could just see his head and shoulders, and he nodded and beckoned to me. I went over to him.

wondering what he had to say, and when I got within reach he seized me, and I was on the ground before I had time to strike out. There was another man there I hadn't seen till then, and he shoved a gag into my mouth, whilst that ruffian, Curling, knelt on my chest. I was too amazed at first to do much. I had no idea I was likely to be attacked."

"Quite so. Well, what happened then?"

"It was getting dark, and the college bell was clanging, and I heard some of the fellows hurrying past, but none came into the shrubbery," Bob Benton continued. "They'd never think of doing that unless they kicked the football into it, or something of that sort. I was half stifled, and mad with rage, but I couldn't stir, and there the two curs kept me for half an hour. All was quiet by that time, and they lifted me up, and carried me as fast as they could to Curling's house, and I didn't envy them for the job, for I struggled like a good 'un."

"Yes. And then?"

"About midnight, they carried me out, and flung me into a cart and drove away. I didn't see where they were going, for I was lying in the cart, gagged and bound, with a lot of sacks thrown over me; but at last they stopped, and tied a big rope around my middle. Then, when they pulled me out into the open air, I saw that I was close to the sea. Curling lowered me over the top of the cliff with a rope, and the other cur had gone down the cliff before us, and was standing at the mouth of a cave. He undid the rope, and hauled me into the cave, and tied me up to a hook."

"And there you were found by the man Sinclair Bevan," Blake said.

"Yes. However do you know that?" Bob Benton asked, in amazement.

"Never mind at present about that; continue the story," Blake replied.

"I was kept a good long time before Bevan rescued me," Bob explained. "And rotten disagreeable it was, too! But one night I heard footsteps, and I thought either Curling or the other fellow was coming to bring me grub, and instead of that Bevan turned up. He ungagged and unbound me, and told me to scoot whilst I had the chance. You bet I wasn't half willing. He said that this was a big plot, and that you were abroad, and that he was a detective, and that the Lord Chancellor had told him to hunt me out. And he explained that a whole gang were concerned in the business against me on account of my property, and that the Lord Chancellor was in great fear about my life, so that he had arranged that Bevan should look after me. I didn't mind that—I was jolly glad to have a holiday; and when he said we were to take boat at once, but that I was to be sure first to wire to the Lord Chancellor and tell him I was all right, I felt certain he was what he had said."

"Did he tell you to explain to the Lord Chancellor that you were crossing to the Continent?" Blake inquired.

"No. I did that myself. We were in no end of a hurry. The boat was about to start, and we were afraid of losing it."

"You hurried from the cave?"

"Rather! Bevan told me that Curling might turn up at any moment, and I didn't waste time, I can tell you. I nipped up the cliff, and ran to a gig and tumbled in, and lay down for fear I'd be spotted. And we were only just in time, for Curling did get there as we bolted."

"Yes, Curling was there, but I was there also, and I tried hard to overtake the gig," Blake explained. "Now——"

"I was running away from you?" Bob Benton cried, in dismay.

"That's the fact, my lad," Blake replied, with a droll smile. "I almost had my hand on you when Bevan got you away. Well, you came on here, and you put up at the monastery for the night, and then you left, and as you and Bevan were walking together you were set upon. I've heard all about that. You were dragged away by some of the bandits, and Bevan was thrown to the ground by the rest. And you never saw him again. Isn't that so?"

"Yes. It's wonderful, Mr. Blake, how you found out so much."

"I had to work hard, Bob, to discover what I did, and there's a great deal—a very great deal—that is still a puzzle to me," Blake replied. "Let me see exactly where we stand."

He had finished his breakfast, and now he drummed on the table with his fingers, gazing at the wall opposite with a frown of concentration on his face.

"You have described this man Bevan to me," he began; "that ruffian Curling described the other fellow who kidnapped you. He said he was about thirty-five years of age, middling tall, fairly strong, and dark. Humph! Not much to go on, but still something."

"He was decidedly tall!" Bob Benton cried.

"And thin, and he had long legs?" Tinker asked quickly.

"Yes. Do you know him, too?"

Blake and Tinker looked at one another. The great detective nodded his head and smiled.

"The same thought occurred to both of us, Tinker," he said. "I have been wondering if he could be the tourist we overtook after we left Drogen's cottage, the man we saw attacked by Lutzatti's gang, and who ran away from me? Well, Bob, I won't trouble you with any more questions now. Your explanation has been very lucid, and I hope to gain something by it. Tinker we must get ready to start. We have a long tramp before we reach the station, and I want to catch the first train and to get back to London as soon as possible."

Half an hour later Blake and Tinker had left the monastery, and were tramping down the mountain-side, up which they had struggled with difficulty on that night when first they had made the acquaintance of the monks. Then it had been dark, and the snow was falling fast, and, tired and desperate, they had stumbled on, with Pedro as their guide. Now the sun was shining, and the white peaks were glistening, and the rivulets were rippling, and there was life and movement in the valley. Pedro was walking quietly behind them; the whole district seemed to be at peace. As they reached a turn in the road, Tinker looked back to catch a last glimpse of the monastery. He waved his hand.

"Young Benton is gazing at us, sir," he said. "I'll bet he feels sorry he can't come with us."

Blake turned also, and fluttered his handkerchief.

"Yes, he'd like to be back in the dear old land, I'm sure," he said, as they resumed their journey. "But I'm keeping him here purposely, Tinker. If we had to leave him in England he might be kidnapped again, and he's absolutely safe in the monastery. We have hard work before us yet, my lad, and he's not fit for that at present."

"No, he ain't, though he'd go through a lot more without grumbling," Tinker replied. "He's a good kid, sir. There's no mistake about that. There's one thing, though, that's puzzling me more than anything else."

"And what is that?" Blake asked:

"I'm wondering what's happened to Datchford," Tinker replied.

"And I'm wondering when he came here," Blake said. "I thought it was Datchford who got hold of Bob Benton and took him out of England, but I'm mistaken in that. I was surprised at breakfast when the lad's statement convinced me that it was someone else."

"But this man Sinclair Bevan may be Datchford, when all's said," Tinker urged. "They're both stout, and about the same age, and both have got an oily manner, and——"

"Quite so, but Datchford was dressed in frock-coat and patent-leather boots when I rescued him from Lutzatti," Blake interjected; "and Benton says that the other fellow was wearing tweeds; and Datchford would not be got-up here in City dress if he had rough clothes to wear. No, no; this man Sinclair Bevan is quite another party."

"A friend of Galard's, you think?"

"Possibly."

"Datchford had nothing to do with young Benton or his property, had he, sir?" Tinker continued meditatively. "He was Sir Henry Fastow's solicitor, and Galard was Benton's. Isn't that so? And Datchford didn't half abuse Galard for the way he had robbed Benton when he called that day at Baker Street. Datchford can't be in this business, sir. He couldn't get the handling of Benton's money; it's Galard who got that."

"What you say is correct in part," Blake agreed. "But in return there's just one question I'll ask you."

"All right, sir; fire away!"

"If Datchford is not interested in this matter, why did he come here?"

"I don't know," Tinker admitted.

"And I don't, either; but I'm going to find out," Blake replied. "That's why we're off to London."

CHAPTER 26.

A Fresh Scent.

TINKER walked over to the window, and looked down into Baker Street. A motor-'bus was grinding past, the conductor hanging on to the rail and gesticulating rapidly; hansoms were rattling through the slush, men and women were hurrying along the pavements, housemaids were polishing the knockers and scrubbing the steps; hoarse voices, the clang of bells, the toot of motors, the rumble of wheels, all the old familiar sounds brought a smile to the lad's lips and a bright light to his eyes. For to him these were the outward signs of home; he was back again in the London that he loved so well, back in that self-contained city of vast distances and impressive magnificence and multitudinous interests, that city of life which caters for all tastes, and garners all that the rest of the world has to give.

He rattled his keys in his pocket, and chuckled as he felt the warm glow that the sight of London brings after absence to the hearts of her sons and her daughters. Despite the greyness of the day, elation seized him; he felt alert, anxious for work, self-confident, and hopeful. He longed to get out and about and to join in the bustling crowd; for new scenes may pall, but London's novelty is inexhaustible.

"Ah, my lad, at the window first thing!" Blake said, with a laugh, as he entered the room. "I thought I'd find you there. When we've had breakfast, take Pedro for a run. I'm starting out on business, but I hope to be back for lunch."

"And there's nothing for me to do, sir?"

"Nothing at present. I'm only going to make some inquiries."

Blake sat down to breakfast, and read the morning paper during the course of the meal. Then he lit a cigar, took his hat, gloves, and umbrella and left the house. Hailing a hansom, he drove first to Fleet Street, and alighted at the office of Datchford & Blobbs. He pushed open the door, and walked into the front office. The man and the boy he had seen on the previous visit were both there; the boy was pulling books out of a safe, and the man was hanging his hat on a peg. They both looked at the celebrated detective, and once again they exchanged a swift glance.

"Has Mr. Blobbs arrived yet?" Blake inquired.

"No, sir," the man replied.

"When do you expect him?"

"I can't—er—really say, sir! If you leave your card, I'll hand it to him, and he'll write to you in due course making an appointment," replied the man.

"He's in London, I suppose?" Blake suggested.

"Oh, yes!"

"Then I think I'll wait."

He was about to sit down, when the door was pushed open, and a big man dressed in City attire with a bag in his hand, hurried in, and advanced as if to cross to the inner office. Blake stepped forward.

"Good-morning, Mr. Blobbs!" he said. "Can I have a few words with you?"

The new-comer stopped, and gazed swiftly at Blake.

"I don't—er—quite recognise you!" he began. "You seem to know my name, and——"

"You are Mr. Blobbs—isn't that so?" Blake inquired.

"Yes. But how do you know—that is——"

"You came in as if you were the owner of these premises," Blake explained, "so I guessed your identity. My name is Sexton Blake. I have met your partner, Mr. Datchford."

"Ah, Blake—Sexton Blake!" Blobbs replied, rubbing his chin, and bending now to brush some mud from his coat tails. "Oh, yes, I know who you are! Curiously enough, your name has been brought professionally before me in the last few days. It's a very awkward business, really; but—— However—— Step this way!"

He opened the door of the inner office, and Blake followed. Having closed the door, Blobbs laid his bag on a desk, put his topper into a bandbox, pulled off his gloves, sat down at the desk, and arranged his blotting-pad neatly. Then he leant back on his chair, gazed first at his finger-nails, then at the ceiling, and lastly at Blake.

"Take a chair!" he suggested.

Blake sat down.

Blobbs evidently was not in a very happy frame of mind. He shifted on his seat, fingered his penholders, opened a drawer and closed it swiftly, and then leant forward on the desk.

"Well?" he said.

Blake had been watching him narrowly.

"Have you been for a holiday, Mr. Blobbs?" he asked.

"Oh dear, no; business doesn't allow of that!" Blobbs replied hurriedly. "These are our best times, and I have too much to do. Ha, ha, ha! But that reminds me. People have been inquiring about you, and no one seems to know where you could be found. You've been out of the country, I suppose? Well, I'm glad you've come back. It's always best to face the music!"

"What do you mean?" Blake inquired sharply. "I hope I'm free to travel as I like, and I fail to understand why anyone should ask you any questions about me!"

"My dear sir, pray don't misunderstand me!" Blobbs urged. "I'm only thinking of your interests—that's all. We are the solicitors for Lady Fastow, you know, and her husband and you were trustees of the property of that poor young fellow Benton, who was kidnapped so mysteriously. The

Lord Chancellor has been communicating with us, and the impression has got abroad that you fled the country in order to avoid your liabilities in that lamentable affair. It has come as a terrible blow to Lady Fastow, and, of course, if she had to pay the lot she would be almost bankrupt. Naturally we look to you to share the loss. Very ugly rumours have got afloat, Mr. Blake, and you may rest certain that I contradicted them all. I'm glad you're back—very glad! For though, of course, not much can be done at present, still the money will have to be forthcoming promptly if ever young Benton is found."

"Young Benton has been found!" Blake replied.

Blobbs started. His face flushed; he looked with dulled eyes at Blake.

"He's been found!" he gasped. "Who found him?"

"I did!"

Blobbs's mouth was twitching. He picked up a penholder, and began dabbing the blotting-paper so hard that the nib broke.

"Where did you find him?" he asked, without raising his head.

"In Switzerland."

The solicitor took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. For several seconds Blake had not a chance of seeing his face.

"Have you brought him back to London?" Blobbs asked.

"No, not yet."

"You ought to do that, Mr. Blake!" Blobbs said gravely. "You ought to hand him over to the Lord Chancellor!"

They gazed at one another. There was an earnest look in the solicitor's eyes which changed gradually under the great detective's piercing gaze. His eyelids quivered, he turned away, and opening a drawer again he stared into it intently.

"You think that Robert Benton would be safer here than where he is at present?" Blake suggested.

"My dear sir, I don't know where he is; I don't know anything about him!" Blobbs replied snappishly. "But he is a ward of Court, and he should be returned at once to the custody of the Lord Chancellor as a matter of course. However, that has nothing to do with me. I am only giving you this advice for your own sake."

There was an odd smile on Blake's face as he replied:

"Thanks! It's very good of you to take such an interest in a stranger," he said.

Blobbs did not notice the sarcasm. He was surprisingly flurried, and he seemed anxious to be allowed to start his day's work. He had begun to open his letters.

"Pray don't consider me a stranger, Mr. Blake," he urged, with a sudden gush of friendliness. "You and my partner, Mr. Datchford, are friends, and that is good enough for me. Just think on the advice I have given you. I'm a solicitor, you know, and, therefore, in a position to judge the attitude the Lord Chancellor is likely to adopt should he hear that young Benton has been found and that he is being kept out of the country."

"The Lord Chancellor need not know anything about Robert Benton for the present," Blake suggested.

"Ah, news of that kind quickly leaks out!" Blobbs remarked, as he dropped half a dozen empty envelopes into his wastepaper-basket. "And the Lord Chancellor is a stern sort of man. And he has great power, you know. I shouldn't like to thwart him."

Blake stood up.

"Well, I won't detain you longer," he said, "for I see that you want to get to work. By the way, how is Mr. Datchford? Has he returned to London yet?"

"Not yet. I expect him any day now, though."

"He had gone to Paris, I was told."

"Yes. And he's enjoyed himself very much. I hear from him every day. He's a lucky fellow to get away. But it was his turn for a holiday, and I mustn't grumble."

"He's been in Paris all the time, I suppose?"

"Yes. When he returns I'll tell him you were asking for him. Good-day, Mr. Blake. I'm delighted to have had the pleasure of meeting you."

Blake walked out into Fleet Street, and stood for some seconds on the kerb, his hands in his pockets, a frown on his face.

"That man is as big a liar as ever I met!" he murmured, as he began to stroll towards Chancery Lane. "I wonder how he would have looked if I had told him that I had met Datchford in Switzerland and that I had rescued him from the clutches of Lutzatti. He says that Datchford has been in Paris all this time and that he has heard from him every day. And Blobbs is as brown as a berry himself, and he says he has not had a holiday, and men's faces don't get tanned in London in the middle of winter. And he advises me to bring young Benton back here. Ah, that looks suspicious! Benton was kidnapped, and in England! The same thing could easily occur again. No, I have no intention of telling the Lord Chancellor that I have found the lad until I have cleared up the mystery of his property. And I'll keep my eye on Blobbs. He deserves a bit of watching."

The great detective went up Chancery Lane and entered the office that Galard owned before he had absconded. A man was sitting by the fire, and he stood up as Blake entered.

"Mr. Galard has not returned to London?" Blake inquired.

The man smiled.

"No, sir; and he's not expected back," he said.

"Were you in his employment?"

"No. The Official Receiver has put me here to keep an eye on things."

"Then Galard has been made bankrupt?"

"Yes."

"Humph! I'm Sexton Blake the detective. Has anyone been inquiring for Mr. Galard lately?"

"There was a gentleman came in yesterday, sir, and he's the first that called for some days. His name was Datchford."

"Datchford!" Blake exclaimed. "An elderly man, stout, with a ruddy face, and well dressed?"

"That's him, sir."

Blake wheeled round and walked out of the room. Here was a fresh surprise. Datchford had got back to London the day before, and Blobbs had said he was still in Paris. Surely that deliberate falsehood must have been uttered with a purpose. Coupling this with the suspicions that had been already forming in his mind, Blake felt that he was on the verge of a fresh discovery in connection with the mystery.

"Datchford and Blobbs are in this swindle!" he muttered, as he strode along. "They've been in it from the beginning. I'm certain of that now. Yes, and it is for that reason that Datchford went to Switzerland, and that Blobbs wants Bob Benton back in England, so that the villains can get their hands on him again. But how am I ever going to bring them to justice? How can I ever prove the part they played? I have nothing in the way of evidence—absolutely nothing. Suspicion points to their guilt, but the proof is what I must find. No matter, I've tackled swindles that looked as difficult at first, and I have unravelled them step by step. I've got a line on which to work, anyhow, and I'll keep on it steadily. Yes, and I'll start my investigations at once."

A hansom was crawling past. He hailed it, and jumped in.

"Drive to the Bank of England," he said; "and push on! I am in a hurry!"

CHAPTER 27.

A Message from the Lord Chancellor.

BLAKE entered the Bank of England, crossed to the counter, and took from his pocket-book one of the banknotes he had found at the inn in Splugaren when he had raided the secret room there. He handed it across to the clerk.

"I am Sexton Blake the detective," he said, "and this note has come into my possession. I would be glad if you could tell me anything about it. It is for a large sum—one thousand pounds! Perhaps after investigations you will know the name of the customer to whom it was delivered?"

The clerk took the note and left the counter. In a few minutes he returned.

"This note was sent to the City & Surburban Bank in Piccadilly," he said. "If you want any further information you must inquire there."

Blake drove to the bank at Piccadilly and asked to see the manager. He was escorted into an inner room where an elderly man was seated at a desk. The latter rose.

"Good-morning!" Blake began. "You are the manager, I think?"

"Yes. My name is Lounds."

"And mine is Sexton Blake."

"Ah, pleased to meet you, Mr. Blake! In what way can I be of service?"

"I am investigating an extremely difficult case," Blake began, "and it is of the utmost importance that I should know into whose hands a Bank of England note for one thousand pounds has passed. Here is the note. It was sent to this office by the Bank of England. Can you tell me to whom it was handed across the counter?"

"One moment, and I will make inquiries," Lounds replied, leaving the room.

In a few minutes he returned with a young cashier.

"This note was handed to a Mr. Galard by this young gentleman, in part payment of a cheque," Lounds explained.

"Do you know that Mr. Galard has been made a bankrupt, that the Official Receiver has taken possession of his effects, and that Galard has absconded?" Blake asked next.

"Yes. But this transaction was prior to his bankruptcy."

"I quite understand that. Well, Mr. Lounds, if you know the name of the Official Receiver, I'd be obliged if you'd ring him up on the telephone, and explain to him that I am here, and that I hold a banknote of Galard's for a thousand pounds," Blake continued. "That news will bring him here like a shot."

"Rather!" Lounds agreed, with a smile. "Take a seat, and there's this day's paper, Mr. Blake. Groten, you can go back to work."

Twenty minutes later a keen-faced, professional-looking man was ushered into the office, and as he entered he gazed sharply at Blake and the bank manager.

"I am the Official Receiver in the case of Galard the bankrupt," he began. "Someone here told me an amazing story on the telephone a few minutes ago about a thousand-pound Bank of England note belonging to Galard, and said to be now in the possession of Mr. Sexton Blake, the celebrated detective. My name is Dunstan, and I have called to inquire if this story can possibly be correct."

"I'm Sexton Blake, and the story is absolutely true," Blake replied. "There is the note, and Mr. Lounds, the manager of this bank, has identified it as one that was handed to Galard. You can keep it, Mr. Dunstan. I don't suppose I can give you more convincing proof of the fact that it belonged to Galard than by parting with it so readily."

"But, however did you get it? This is a most amazing mystery!" Dunstan gasped. "When Galard was made bankrupt, this bank was served with a notice not to part with any money lodged in his name, and it seems that there is only a sum of ten pounds or so standing to his credit. And now here is a big sum which will do a great deal towards paying his unfortunate creditors."

"I may be able to do a good deal more towards that end if you take me fully into your confidence," Blake replied. "But on the other hand I cannot tell you just now how I happened to get hold of that banknote. Secrecy is absolutely vital at present if Galard is to be caught. And I am the only man who can do that."

"Will you come to my office, then?" Dunstan suggested. "All the papers are there, and I will allow you to look through them."

"Certainly!" Blake replied, jumping up and seizing his hat and stick.

Though outwardly unconcerned, and guarded in his conversation on the short drive to Dunstan's office, Blake was inwardly elated. When once the papers were laid before him he began to examine then attentively, and he noticed that immense sums had passed through Galard's hands in the two months prior to his absconding. But nowhere was there any reference to Datchford or Blobbs. Cheques for large amounts had been paid to other men, and he entered the names of all in his notebook. Dunstan had given him a room in which he might make his investigations without being disturbed; and as Blake concluded, the former entered.

"Well, have you found out anything useful?" he asked anxiously.

"Nothing conclusive," Blake replied. "May I ask, though, the amount for which Galard has failed?"

"So far the total amount of his liabilities as made up from the claims of creditors only come to nineteen hundred pounds," the Official Receiver replied.

"Then how do you account for the large transactions he had during the eight weeks before he absconded?" inquired Blake.

"I can't account for them," Dunstan admitted. "I am surprised like yourself at the smallness of his liabilities, and I am expecting further claims every day."

"One large creditor for a hundred thousand pounds would be sufficient explanation?" Blake suggested.

"Certainly."

"I have calculated that that amount has been lodged to his account in the bank during a period of six months, and has been mostly paid out to other people," Blake continued. "By the way, did not Galard make a confession, and did he not hand it to Mr. Datchford?"

"To Datchford the solicitor," Dunstan answered. "I never heard anything about that."

"Datchford did not hand over to you the document in which Galard admitted his guilt?" Blake cried sharply.

"No."

"Datchford called on me at Baker Street some time ago, and told me that Galard had admitted his guilt in writing, and had sent the document to him," Blake said quickly. "And Datchford also added that he had gone to Galard's office, had looked into everything, and had satisfied himself that Galard had unlawfully acquired a property worth a hundred thousand pounds."

"Then why did not Datchford acquaint me with all this?" Dunstan demanded.

"I'm sure I don't know," Blake replied. "I believe, though, in point of fact, that he went on the Continent about that time."

"But he has a partner, a Mr. Blobbs," the Official Receiver urged. "The firm of Datchford & Blobbs is well known. In the absence of Datchford it would have been Blobbs' duty to acquaint the Court with this important fact."

"Well, it is for you to demand a satisfactory explanation from them," Blake suggested. "I saw Mr. Blobbs this morning. He is in London, anyhow."

"I certainly won't let much time pass before I call on him," Dunstan replied; "and——"

"Before you go there, I should like to ask you to help me in another way," Blake interjected. "Where did Galard live?"

"He was not married, and he had lodgings in Bloomsbury," Dunstan replied.

"And you have taken possession of his effects there?"

"Yes."

"May I go there and have a look around his rooms? The Court is anxious to have him arrested, of course, and possibly I may be able to get on his track if you grant me this favour."

"Certainly. His address was No. 41, Ecleton Street, Bloomsbury," Dunstan replied. "One of my clerks will accompany you, and you are quite at liberty to examine his effects. If you wait a moment I will send the young fellow to you, and then I must get off. I mean to call at Datchford's office at once."

Half an hour later Blake was examining three boxes which had been filled with Galard's belongings. After a protracted and exhaustive search he left the lodgings, hailed a hansom, and drove to Baker Street. He came up the stairs to the sitting-room so rapidly that Tinker, who was sitting by the fire reading the newspaper, jumped to his feet, with a bright light in his eyes. As Blake strode into the room his face was aglow with joy.

"Good news!" Tinker cried.

"Capital news! And capital fun, my lad!" Blake laughed. "For one thing, I've got the Official Receiver in Galard's case worked up to a pitch of indignation. He's on the track of Datchford and Blobbs, and those two villains will be hard set to cope with him."

"Then they are villains?" Tinker cried.

"Yes. I have no doubt whatever on that head. They've been in this swindle with Galard, though to what extent I am quite unable to say as yet. Blobbs is a very shifty lot, and a most deliberate liar. He told me that Datchford is still in Paris, and I found since that that precious old humbug is back already in London."

"I never did believe in that there Datchford," Tinker replied. "Why, sir, instead of being in Paris he has been in Switzerland, as we know well. But you haven't found out what brought him there, have you?"

"No. But looking through Galard's papers a while ago I came across some correspondence that has passed between him and the man Sinclair Bevan, who decoyed young Benton to Switzerland," Blake replied. "And I have found out the names of several men to whom Galard gave cheques for large amounts. And Blobbs was altogether taken aback when I told him that we had rescued the lad. He behaved for some moments as if he had quite lost his nerve. Putting all these things together, I feel that we are drawing the net quickly around the real conspirators. I have great hopes now that the mystery will be cleared up in a couple of days."

He sat down at his desk, opened his notebook and several papers, and began to work. Before long he was so absorbed in his task that he did not stir when there was a knock at the door. Tinker left the room noiselessly, and returned in a couple of seconds with a stranger. Blake did not even look round.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," Tinker began; "but this man has called on most particular business, and it is quite necessary that you should see him."

Blake wheeled round. A shade of annoyance was on his face.

"What does he want?" Blake demanded.

The man stepped forward. He was respectably dressed, and his manner was a trifle pompous.

"Excuse me, sir, but you are Mr. Sexton Blake?" he asked; and there was an odd challenge in his voice.

"Yes. And who are you?"

"I am the Lord Chancellor's messenger, and he has sent me here to take you into custody if you decline to come to the court," the other replied. "I'd be sorry to be obliged to have recourse to extremes, but a policeman is at the door downstairs, and——"

Blake sprang to his feet.

"The Lord Chancellor has sent for me?" he cried. "How does he know that I have returned to London?"

"Can't say, I'm sure," the usher replied. "His lordship don't confide in me in those matters. But I have his order, and——"

Blake looked at Tinker.

"This is a plot, my lad," he said gravely. "The villains know that they are at bay. All right, usher, I'll go with you, of course. Tinker, hail a hansom!"

CHAPTER 28.

A Stormy Interview.

THE Lord Chancellor was in his private room when Blake arrived at the courts, and after a delay of some minutes the celebrated detective was ushered into his presence. The Lord Chancellor was standing gazing out of the window, and he turned slowly as Blake advanced and bowed. Though his back was to the light, and his face, therefore, was in a shadow, yet Blake could see that his eyes were flashing, and that his features were set in a stern expression of suppressed anger. Blake stopped when some paces separated them, and waited for the Lord Chancellor to speak. As the latter remained silent, the great detective, in no way deterred by the cold reception he had received, addressed him quietly.

"You sent for me, my lord?" he said.

The Lord Chancellor did not reply at once; he still stood immovable. At last his sonorous voice rose in a challenging question.

"What have you done with Robert Benton?" he demanded.

"I have found him, and placed him in security," Blake replied.

"Why did you not bring him back to London?"

"Because I think that for the present he is safer where he is," Blake replied.

"And where is he?"

"In Switzerland."

The Lord Chancellor moved slowly forward.

"Is this the way you treat my jurisdiction?" he began. "Do you know that you are guilty of contempt of Court?"

"I am not aware that my conduct can be viewed in that light," Blake replied; "but I am always anxious, as a good citizen, to respect the law. I risked my life to save the lad, and I am glad I was successful. I am now seeking to recover his property, and such steps as I am taking as regards Robert Benton are due to the knowledge I hold, and to my experience as a detective."

"And you expect that you will have as great difficulty in recovering the property as you had in finding the lad?" the Lord Chancellor replied.

"Yes."

"Well, in that case I do not think that your task will be a very hard one."

Blake's face flushed, his hands closed involuntarily, his tall, athletic figure grew straight as a ramrod.

"Pardon me! I fail to understand your exact meaning," he replied quickly. "Do you mean to hint that I had no trouble in rescuing your ward?"

"Precisely! I know far more than you fancy. Your conduct all through this case has been suspicious in the extreme!" the Lord Chancellor replied, now giving rein to his feelings. "You were the lad's guardian; you were responsible for his safety. You came to me and told me that he had been robbed. Whilst you were in this room I got a wire to say that he had been kidnapped. You then defied and even threatened me. You left here, and on hearing from young Benton that he was going abroad, I tried to get into communication with you. You had left London, but, all the same, my telegram reached you; it was put into your hands by the headmaster of Halsford College. Instead of coming to me, you, too, went abroad; and on your return to London you did not even come to tell me that Robert Benton has been found, until I send a messenger threatening you with immediate arrest if you did not comply with my command. And now that you have to face me you say that you risked your life to rescue the lad."

"And you don't believe that?"

"No, sir, I do not. I am glad to say that I am not altogether dependent on you for information. I know far more than you fancy."

"Will you kindly give me the name of your informant?" Blake demanded.

"I shall do nothing of the kind!" the Lord Chancellor replied sharply. "I have not summoned you here to bandy words with you, but to deal with you as I think right. I now command you to give me the address of Robert Benton so that I may send my own messenger and have him brought back without further delay."

Blake hesitated. His mind was keen and clear, despite the excitement of the controversy and the danger in which he stood. He knew that neither Datchford nor Blobbs could be aware of the fact that Robert Benton was in the monastery, for it was after parting with Datchford that Blake had rescued the lad. He saw that if Robert Benton was taken back to London he would once again be at the mercy of the villains who had kidnapped him in the first instance, and he suspected that those who had given information to the Lord Chancellor were no friends of the lad. If, on the one hand, he divulged Robert Benton's address, either he might be recaptured, or Datchford and Blobbs, whom he believed to be accomplices in the theft, might take alarm and flee the country; if, on the other hand, he refused to obey the Lord Chancellor, then his own freedom might be imperilled, in which case young Benton's property would be lost for certain. Yet he did not take long to choose the course which seemed least dangerous.

"Despite your lordship's insinuations, which are unworthy of you and unjust to me, I must decline to give Robert Benton's address," he replied. "The lad has enemies here in London. How do I know that some of them have not told you what you have heard with a sinister object? If you give me the name of your informant I will give you the address you want. If you leave this matter to me, not only will I hand your ward over to you in a few days, but also I will be able, I feel almost certain now, to recover the value of his property as well. That your mind has been poisoned against me is quite obvious to me, but I cannot help that."

"Do you mean that my discretion is not to be trusted?" the Lord Chancellor demanded hotly.

"I am quite certain that you would act with the greatest attention to prudence, but there are facts of which you cannot be aware," Blake replied. "Nor can I take you into my confidence just at present. Do detectives tell all they know? What chance would they have of vindicating justice if they spoke before they were ready to strike? I tell you, my lord, I have great fear that those on whom you seem to be relying in this case are not above suspicion themselves."

"Pooh, sir!" the Lord Chancellor scoffed. "They are men of the highest integrity."

"Men with high reputations have been proved to be undeserving of them before now," Blake replied. "And, may I ask, have these people given you any clue as to the question of Robert Benton's fortune? Have they held out any hopes of its recovery? Have you any idea yourself where it is, or how you will set about regaining it? I have. As I have said already, I hope in a few days to be able to lay my hands upon it."

The Lord Chancellor's face changed. He looked at Blake long and steadily, and the great detective read the thoughts in the other's mind. The illustrious lawyer did not believe all that Blake was saying; he suspected him of dishonesty. But, all the same, he evidently had come to the conclusion that Blake would be able to return the money. He came to the conclusion that Blake had been untrue to his trust; that he was in the swindle against young Benton; that he had helped to kidnap him, and that now, fearing danger, he had pretended to rescue him, and that if given time he would refund the money, and pretend that he had found it. As Lord Chancellor, it was his duty to get the money if he could. He decided to temporise, and when once the money was lodged in court he could deal with Blake as he thought best."

"You believe you will have the money in some days?" he said.

"I have great hopes that I will have it," Blake replied.

"Then I will give you three days," the Lord Chancellor answered, with a curious smile. "If you do not succeed in that time I will place you under arrest. Now go!"

His manner was imperious to rudeness. Blake did not even bow. He looked the illustrious lawyer full in the face, and without a word he wheeled round and strode away. But when he reached the lobby he chuckled heartily, feeling well satisfied with the result of the interview.

"It ended better than I had hoped at one time, for if I had been arrested, all my trouble in this case would have gone for nothing, and that would have meant disaster with a vengeance," he murmured. "Yet it is disgraceful, that a man, who is working solely in the cause of justice, should be subjected to such outrageous treatment. I'm glad that I'm not thin-skinned, and that I usually manage to turn the tables on those who take a high hand with me. Yes, and the Lord Chancellor will be no exception, either! As an honourable man, it will be his duty to apologise to me before long. I can wait for that, and, meantime, I won't trouble over hard words. I'll get on with my work, and win triumph in the end."

And during the next three days Blake did work, as even Tinker had seldom seen him work before. He took but little rest, he neglected his meals, he was out all day, and at his desk almost all the night. He seldom spoke, the thoughtful expression which his face wore when unravelling a mystery, never left him. And Tinker, anxious to know how his investigations were proceeding, yet unwilling to interrupt, felt the days passing heavily on his hands. Great, therefore, was his delight, when he actually heard Blake whistling as he mounted the stairs. But hardly had Blake entered the room when there was a thundering knock at the hall door, and the great detective started.

"By Jupiter! I forgot!" he said. "That may be someone from the Lord Chancellor, my lad! Go downstairs and see. What a nuisance if he is pestering again! Really, I seem fated to be baulked every time I am close to success."

Tinker hurried to the hall, and returned shortly.

"Mr. Dunstan to see you, sir," he said.

The Official Receiver hurried into the room. He had a big envelope in his hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Blake! I'm glad I've been lucky enough to find you at home!" he began. "I've just got Galard's confession of guilt from Datchford & Blobbs, and I thought you'd like to see it. Some things about it have struck me as peculiar, and——"

"You've only just got it?" Blake interjected. "Have they delayed all this time about sending it to you?"

"Yes. They put me off over and over again, but I was determined not to be baulked," Dunstan explained. "However, here it is now! Read it for yourself."

Blake drew the document from the envelope, and read a few lines. Then he stopped, looked at Dunstan, and again at the document. An expression of amazement had come into his face. Suddenly he darted to his desk, picked out a letter, and laid both it and Galard's confession of guilt on the table. He studied them both for some seconds, whilst Dunstan and Tinker watched him in silent wonder. With a loud chuckle, Blake looked up, and held the papers above his head.

"Hurrah!" he said. "We've got all the evidence we want! We can arrest Datchford and Blobbs to-night! This is a conclusive proof of their villainy!"

CHAPTER 29.

On the Villains' Track.

TINKER gave a shout of delight. Dunstan stared with dazed eyes at Blake.

"Whatever do you mean?" the Official Receiver gasped. "Datchford and Blobbs, you say, are villains! You talk of arresting them! What have they done?"

Blake laid the papers on the table.

"Come round here, and examine that document and the writing on the envelope," he said. "Are they not one and the same?"

"They seem very much alike," Dunstan agreed.

"They are the same," Tinker asserted.

"And the envelope is in the handwriting of Sinclair Bevan, the man who kidnapped young Benton!" Blake explained triumphantly. "Therefore, this document is a forgery—it was not written by Galard. And we know that Galard is not the mysterious Sinclair Bevan. The description given of that scoundrel by Benton does not correspond with Galard. Therefore, this document is a forgery—it was not written by Galard. And we know also, that Datchford has not been masquerading as Sinclair Bevan, for he was not dressed when in Switzerland as Bevan was dressed. Who, then, was Sinclair Bevan? Why, Blobbs, of course! Yes, Blobbs, whose face is as brown as a berry, and who told me that he had not taken a holiday!"

"You've got him, sir!" Tinker cried, with delight. "You've run him down for a dead cert! It's Blobbs who kidnapped Benton!"

"Yes, I found that envelope amongst Galard's effects when I searched his lodgings the other day," Blake went on. "In it was a letter from Bevan to Galard. Therefore, Blobbs has been in communication with Galard all the time the latter was robbing young Benton. And Datchford was in the swindle, too. He lied, when he told me, in this room, that Galard had written out a confession of his guilt. And, during the last three days, I have found out much, too! I've searched for all the men to whom Galard gave cheques, I've been to every bank, I've traced and tracked all payments to one man, using various aliases, and that man was Sinclair Bevan! Sinclair Bevan is Blobbs! Therefore, Blobbs got the money!"

"How much, sir?"

"Fifty thousand pounds in all! Galard has the other fifty thousand! We have only now to catch Datchford, Blobbs, and Galard, and we get our hands on the money!"

Dunstan had been struggling to follow the explanation Blake had been giving to Tinker, but, being in ignorance of all the facts, he had failed, of course. Now he gripped Blake's arm.

"I don't understand still," he urged, "What is all this about which you have been speaking?"

"I have conclusive proof that Datchford and Blobbs were parties to the kidnapping of a lad called Robert Benton, who is a ward of Court, and that they conspired with Galard to rob him of his property," Blake replied. "Blobbs took the lad out to Switzerland, and handed him on to a bandit there called Lutzatti, and I went after the lad and rescued him. I hurried back here to try to recover his property, having come across Datchford out in Switzerland, and not being able to account for his presence there, I suspected him of being a party to the plot, and I hoped to get proof one way or the other in London. Now I have got ample proof of his guilt. This is a startling story to a methodical business man like you, Dunstan, but my duty is to deal with criminals, and such crimes as these are quite everyday experiences with me."

"I am amazed!" Dunstan replied. "Then, Datchford & Blobbs, well-known solicitors, have perpetrated a deliberate fraud?"

"They have, and they'll take the consequences," Blake replied.

"Just one moment, sir!" Tinker said. And his shrewd young face was wrinkled up in thought. "Seems to me, all this business wants a bit of explaining still. Here's what's puzzling me. If Blobbs and Datchford rowed in with Galard in this crime, then why did Blobbs cut over to the Continent with young Benton, after Galard had nabbed him down at Halsford? It was Sinclair Bevan, whom we know now to be Blobbs, who took Benton out of the cave before you got there, and drove away with him in the yellow gig. And why did Datchford go to Switzerland, and how was it that that old humbug was taken a prisoner by Lutzatti?"

"Very sensible questions, Tinker!" Blake replied approvingly. "The explanation of the first is, that Blobbs quarrelled with Galard over the spoils, and as Galard would not come to terms, he followed him down to Halsford, seized Benton, and handed him over to Lutzatti, being resolved that Galard wouldn't get him till he had agreed to whatever Blobbs and Datchford wanted. Datchford evidently went out to Switzerland on Galard's track, when the latter started after Blobbs. When we go back to Switzerland, we will find out why Lutzatti made a prisoner of Datchford."

"Then, what are we going to do now?" Dunstan asked.

"I'm going to arrest Datchford and Blobbs to-night, and I'm not coming back to these rooms until I have Galard, too!" Blake replied. "The Lord Chancellor may issue a warrant for my arrest at any moment, and I don't intend to be caught. He wanted me to give him young Benton's address, and I felt obliged to refuse. That angered him very much, and——"

"But the Lord Chancellor knows his address!" Dunstan cried. "I met Duckham, his messenger, in the courts two days ago, and the fellow was in a high old humour. He told me he was off to some monastery in Switzerland, to bring back a ward of Court, and he was naturally looking forward with pleasure to the trip. After what you have told me, I feel sure that that young fellow must be Benton, and——"

Blake gasped.

"Someone found out where Benton is staying!" he cried. "If the lad is taken from the monastery, he will never reach London! Who could have told the Lord Chancellor?"

He stopped. Consternation was on his face. Tinker, too, was seized with a terrible foreboding. But Blake's strong will soon came to his assistance. He spoke again, and his voice was strong and even.

"We must hurry back at once to the monastery," he said. "Tinker, order a motor-car, take Pedro, and travel down to Dover. Wait for me there, and probably I will arrive in time to cross the Channel to-night. Dunstan, I rely on you not to say a word of what has passed between us just now. You have heard enough, I am sure, to convince you that secrecy is absolutely essential if Benton is to be saved, and the villains are not to escape. Now, I'll slip away, whilst I have the chance. Good-bye, and keep silent."

"Where are you going, sir?" Tinker asked.

"To face Datchford and Blobbs. And I wouldn't be surprised if——"

He stopped speaking, seized his hat, overcoat, and stick, and hurried downstairs.

The short, winter evening was closing in, and Blake, hurrying along the pavement, hailed the first taximeter he could see, and directed to be driven to Fleet Street. Pushing open the door of Datchford & Blobbs's office unceremoniously, he marched in.

"Tell Mr. Blobbs I want to see him at once!" he said to the boy.

"He ain't in!" the boy replied.

"When do you expect him?"

"Dunno!"

"Well, I'm not going to stand any of your nonsense; I'll see for myself," Blake replied. And he strode towards the inner door. The boy sprang to bar the way, but Blake pushed him to one side, opened the door, and entered Blobbs's sanctum. The room was in disorder. All the drawers were wide open and empty, the grate was full of burnt papers, Blobbs's hat-box was lying in a corner, the square carpet was rumpled. The air was full of dust, piles of rubbish were scattered about, a Continental railway guide was lying open on the desk; everything gave unmistakable evidence of a hurried flight. Blake caught the boy by the arm, and gazed at him with terrible sternness.

"You know what all this means!" he thundered. And he pointed to the room. "Do you want to be arrested? If not, you had better tell me the truth!"

The boy, so cheeky a few moments before, was now thoroughly scared. He began to tremble; then he put knuckles to his eyes.

"Blobbs has run away! Isn't that so?" Blake went on.

"'Tain't my fault, mister. I've had nothing to do with it," the lad whimpered.

"Where has he gone?"

"I dunno! I'd tell you if I did. I've lost my billet, I know that. And he didn't even wait to pay me my screw!"

"Was it you who took a big envelope to the Official Receiver?"

"Yes, mister."

"And was Blobbs here when you came back?"

"Yes."

"What happened to make him clear out?"

"He was rung up on the telephone yonder, and then he came out to the office, looking as white as a sheet. He sent me to the bank to cash a cheque, and when I came back the room was as you see it. As soon as I gave him the money, he told me to call a cab, and when it was at the door, he carried a couple of bags out himself, and jumped into the cab and drove away."

"Did he say anything before he left?"

"Not a word, mister. He looked to scared to talk."

Blake hurried out into the street, and jumped into the taximeter.

"To Wandsworth!" he directed. "And get along as fast as you can."

The taximeter glided off, and the chauffeur, threading his way swiftly through the traffic, drove down the Strand, crossed into the West End, and took the road to Putney Bridge. Blake, sitting eager and alert, felt the minutes pass by with desperate slowness, though in point of fact, the chauffeur was making good time. At last they ran up Putney High Street, turned to the left, and entered Wandsworth.

"To Daniper Street!" Blake shouted.

The chauffeur nodded, and drove on. When they reached the corner of the street, Blake alighted and told the man to wait. It was dark now; the street was lit with a few lamps, each far apart from the next. He could approach Datchford's house without being observed. The house was in darkness, and there were the marks of recent wheels on the soft ground.

Blake walked up the path, and knocked at the door. There was not a sound in answer. He strode round the house, and looked in at every window on the ground-floor. Every room was empty. As he hurried out to the street again, he noticed for the first time that there was a small board fastened to the railing.

"To let."

These were the words he read, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Datchford has taken flight, too!" he murmured. "But I guess I'll meet them both again before long! Now for Dover and the Continent! The rest will be played out there!"

CHAPTER 30.

Back to the Monastery.

"IT'S a good job, sir, that the weather is not like what it was last time, and that we know the country."

"Yes, Tinker. We ought to reach the monastery before long now."

Blake and Tinker once again were tramping up the hill on which they had nearly perished in the snowstorm on that eventful night when Pedro had led them to the haven of the Brothers of St. Bernard.

Once again the faithful bloodhound was trotting on ahead, pausing occasionally to look back, and then resuming the journey. The stars in the firmament were twinkling, the moon was shining, the mountain peaks were glittering with snow, the night was calm and silent. Tramping along, speaking but seldom, and covering the ground at a steady pace, they were drawing near to the monastery after a long day's march, and the lad was looking forward with eagerness to a good meal and the warmth of a fire, and the cordial reception he knew from past experience he could count upon. Blake's face was grave. All through the journey from London, made without pause or rest, he had been strangely agitated. And now whilst Tinker's mind was running pleasantly on the anticipation of good cheer, Blake was approaching the monastery with a feeling of fear. Would he find Robert Benton there on his arrival? He had asked himself that question a hundred times in the past two days. Before long now he would receive the answer.

Suddenly a light flashed across the hillside, swept over the crest of an adjoining valley and vanished. All was gloom again. Tinker spoke a trifle angrily.

"There it goes for the fourth time, sir!" he cried. "It must be a searchlight of some sort! There are soldiers out here, I'm certain!"

"Yes, I quite agree," Blake replied.

"Rum go, though, that they should be encamped up in this altitude in weather like this!" Tinker continued. "I don't envy them, anyhow! Ugh! It's cold work sleeping out of doors around a log fire in the middle of winter with the snow everywhere. I'm glad I'll be under a roof. But what have they been called out for, I wonder? 'Tain't likely they're just on manœuvres, and Switzerland is a very quiet country; she never goes to war with anyone! Ah, I've got it now! They're hunting down Lutzatti!"

There was a ring of triumph in the lad's voice as he concluded, and he turned a bright, questioning face towards Blake. But the latter did not show that Tinker's suggestion met with his assent. On the contrary, he looked more grave even than before, and quickened his pace.

"I wish we were at the monastery, or that those fellows would stop using their flashlight," he said. "This is awkward—very awkward!"

Tinker turned his head quickly.

"Why do you say that, sir?" he asked. "How can it matter to us?"

"It matters very much to us," Blake replied, "for those fellows are searching for me. I'm certain of that."

Tinker gasped.

"As soon as we came into Swiss territory I thought I was an object of suspicion," Blake went on. "I saw a gendarme watching me closely, but the train moved out of the station before he could speak to me. At our next stop, a couple strolled up and down past our carriage hesitatingly, and you may remember that when we reached Fritorf I jumped out of the train whilst it was still in motion and hurried away. I have an idea why they want to catch me, but—— Ah, there's the monastery! Come on, my lad; we'd better get inside, if possible, before they work the flashlight again!"

They had turned a bend in the road whilst Blake had been speaking, and the great grey walls of the monastery had loomed into sight. Blake quickened his steps, Tinker trudged eagerly by his side, and Pedro ran on before them, wagging his tail.

They had reached the door, and were under the shelter of the porch before the next flashlight crossed the path. Thus, therefore, they were in darkness.

The door was opened in answer to Blake's ring, and the monk standing there recognised the travellers, and gave a glad cry.

"Ah, Brother John!" he said. "Come in—come in! The Prior is anxious to see you. He will be rejoiced to know of your arrival."

"Is Robert Benton in the monastery still?" Blake asked quickly.

"Yes—oh, yes! We would not part with him. But the Prior will explain all. Wait a few moments here. He will not delay to see you, I am sure."

The monk had ushered Blake and Tinker into the room they had occupied when at the monastery before, and now he closed the door and went away. Blake began walking up and down; he was too agitated to keep still, and Tinker watched him uneasily. Presently the door was swiftly opened, and the Prior came in.

"Your arrival has relieved me of a great anxiety, Mr. Blake," he began, as he shook hands cordially with the celebrated detective and Tinker. "Strange things have happened since we last parted, and I have been put to my wits' end to deal with them. We have had a man here demanding that Robert Benton should be handed over to him, and he showed me a letter of authorisation, signed by the Lord Chancellor of Great Britain. I told him that I would not surrender the lad without your assent, and he threatened me at once. Already the consequences have been most serious, but I remembered the promise I gave you to guard Robert Benton, and I would not yield."

"What has happened?" Blake asked.

"Our Government have been appealed to by your Lord Chancellor, and troops have been ordered to proceed here, and take the lad from my custody by force, if necessary," the Prior explained. "The Swiss authorities are prompt to act, and the soldiers may be here at any moment. They have also received instructions to arrest you if you attempt to interfere! I have heard that on reliable authority, for we have friends who would help us out of trouble, if possible. The situation had become alarmingly difficult, but now that you are here matters will be put straight, I hope. At least, I am released from all responsibility from this on. I have kept my promise to you. Is not that so?"

"Yes; and I am very grateful to you, Prior, and very sorry that you should have had such an anxious time," Blake replied earnestly. "I feared the worst as I was on my way here, and it was an immense relief to me to find on my arrival that young Benton was still safe and sound. But, tell me, has anyone else called inquiring for him? I am most anxious to be informed on that point."

"No one has called here, but inquiries have been made about him in the village," the Prior explained. "The good folks there are very much alarmed by the arrival of the troops, and are giving us all the information in their power from time to time. And now, Mr. Blake, what do you intend to do? We must decide quickly."

"I cannot surrender Benton at the present moment," Blake replied firmly. "Too much depends on keeping him free. If the Swiss authorities captured him, they would hand him over at once to the Lord Chancellor's messenger, and there are enemies lurking around who would fall upon the lad. But, on the other hand, I do not suggest that you should keep him here any longer, and thus incur the anger of your Government. I will take him away at once, and when the troops call here let them search the monastery for him if they like."

"You will be running a great risk," the Prior said.

"So far as I am dealing with your Government, the risk will not be as great as if the lad remains here," Blake explained. "In that instance his capture would be certain. If I take him away I have a chance of eluding their vigilance. But there is one request I should like to make, and that is, that you will parley with the troops, and raise every legitimate objection to their admission to the monastery for as long as possible."

"I certainly will do that," the Prior agreed. "I see your object. You thus hope to have more time to escape."

Blake smiled.

"I shall not be far away," he replied. "I have other work on hand that I must not neglect to carry through before leaving this neighbourhood, for many things hang together in this perplexing case. And now, Prior, would you send Robert Benton to me? And ask him to bring the three rifles we left here when I started for London, and the ammunition, too, of course."

"Yes. And I will see that a hamper of provisions is prepared at once," the warm-hearted Prior replied. "And I will ask no questions as to your destination, for the less I know the better it will be when I am cross-questioned. But I am very ill at ease on your account, Mr. Blake, and I can only hope that all will end happily," he went on, with a sigh. "You seem to me to be facing desperate odds. They say that the country is crowded with troops."

"There are a good many of them out and about, I'm sure," Blake replied grimly. "I am used, though, to being in a tight corner at times, Prior. Many thanks for your kind offer of provisions! They will come in handy, for we are hungry as it is, but we mustn't stay here for a moment longer than necessary."

Five minutes later there were hurried steps along the corridor, and Bob Benton flung the door open impulsively and rushed in. The lad's face was bright and merry. He gave a shout of delight as soon as he saw that Blake was accompanied by Tinker and Pedro.

"What fun!" he cried. "We are all together again! You kept your word, Mr. Blake, like the brick you are! You said you wouldn't be long away, but I never hoped that you would be back so soon. Here are the rifles. How are you, Tinker? And how is good old Pedro? Ain't this scrumptious? There's no end of a lark in the valley, I'm told. Are we going to have a cut in?"

Blake was loading the rifles rapidly, and Tinker, rising from before the fire, stretched himself, and grinned ruefully.

"I guess I'd like to have a cut in at some grub," he said, "but we must wait for that! We have to fight a rear-guard action, sonny. Seems to me we don't know who are our friends and who are our enemies in this campaign. Ain't that so, sir?"

Blake laughed.

"We have to dodge the troops, and follow up Lutzatti and some other ruffians," he explained. "The situation is complicated, certainly; but in one way it has its advantages. The soldiers may come in handy on our side later on. Ah, here come a couple of the good Brothers with the welcome hampers. Sling your rifles across your shoulders, lads, and carry the hamper between you. I'll lead the way with Pedro. Good-bye, Brother Stanislaus! Good-bye, Brother Ambrose! We will always think of you with most grateful remembrances! The monks of St. Bernard have been true friends to us. Right turn! Quick march!"

CHAPTER 31.

Tinker is Captured.

THEY tramped out of the monastery and wheeled round by the left side of the building. Only just in time! The searchlight flashed out as they rounded the corner and spread its vivid rays over hill and dale, but being worked from the right, the spot where they were walking under the shadow of the monastery was left in darkness. A large clump of trees and thick brushwood lay a quarter of a mile ahead on the side of the mountain, and they hurried towards it in silence. They had gone some way when Blake shouted.

"Take cover!" he cried. "Quick! Quick!"

They scattered and lay down each under the shelter of a bush. The searchlight was sweeping down the mountain towards them. It came to the spot where they lay, and suddenly stopped. Every branch, every bush, every small pebble was as plainly visible in the circle of light as on a summer day when the sun is shining. Blake did not stir, but Tinker shuffled uneasily.

"They've spotted us, sir!" he said.

"No, I don't think so. But they see Pedro, and they're wondering why he's here. Look at him, standing up there and gazing around. If he comes this way to hunt us out, we're done! Go on, good dog—go on!"

Pedro heard the well-known voice and the crisp command. He half-turned, hesitated for a moment, and then galloped up the mountain. For ten more seconds, each full of suspense, the searchlight remained stationary. Then it passed on, swept over the roof of the monastery and dived into the valley.

"Now, whilst we have the chance!" Blake cried, jumping to his feet. "Hurry up, lads! We must get to yonder trees before it comes again!"

Tinker and Bob Benton sprang up, grasped the hamper, and rushed on. Panting, stumbling, sometimes falling, they hurried after Blake, whilst the latter whistled to Pedro to return so that he might put him on the leash. They were near the wood, only a hundred yards or so from it, when the searchlight came back the way it had passed, and now it was travelling fast. Blake, looking over his shoulder, saw it approaching, and shouted a warning.

"Take cover again!" he cried. "Don't delay!"

Tinker and Bob Benton dropped the hamper, dashed for the shelter of the same bush, collided, and fell. They were on their feet in an instant.

"Make for that bush; I'll find another!" Tinker cried, and he dashed off as hard as he could race.

Too late! The bright light swept around him as he was still running and enveloped him wherever he went. And from the distant mountain a warning rifle rang out, followed by another. The lad was half-blinded by those powerful rays. But his quick wit did not desert him. Were he to rush back to his companions they too would be discovered. If he went up the mountain the troops would follow in that direction as soon as they could come upon the scene. The only thing to do was, if possible, to put them off the scent. He dashed down and shouted as he passed Blake.

"They've found me, sir, and they won't let me get away now," he cried. "I'm going back to the monastery so that they'll search there first. Send Pedro back when you are out of danger, and he'll lead me to you when I get a chance to escape."

"Right! That's the best thing to do!" Blake cried after him. "Run as if you've been pegging away for a long time, and as if you're fagged."

The light passed on, and Blake, looking back, saw that it moved with Tinker, and that the lad's lithe form stood out in the centre all the time he ran. The rifle shots had been taken up along the mountain-top; now a bugle call rang forth, clear and strong, and its echoes rolled away in diminishing volume from the crags around. Blake and Bob Benton grasped the hamper and hurried on. As they dived into the wood and lay down in the bracken, Blake, looking back, saw that the monastery was bathed in the strong rays of the searchlight. He waited and watched. The light did not move. Then he knew that Tinker was trapped in the monastery, and that the light would be kept there until the hurrying troops arrived.

"Come on, Bob!" he said. "We must climb up to the top before we can rest. This is a bad business, but it might be worse. They think it's you they've tracked, and Tinker is not a bad hand at getting himself out of a pickle. We can take our time. That light won't stir from where it is."

They climbed the mountain, looking back continually, and at last, tired and hot, they reached the top. There they sat down in silence. For miles around all was in darkness; only the monastery and the grounds fringing it were set in a circle of light. The effect was strange, almost weird, and beautiful in a way. But they had little time and less desire to enjoy its quaint effect; their minds were fully occupied on the misfortune that had befallen Tinker, and soon armed and mounted men began to come out of the darkness into the light. They came from different directions, and formed up in military array. Blake and Bob Benton could see all clearly; the stolid troopers, the hurrying officers, the curveting horses, the waving plumes, and shining helmets, and one figure dressed in black which joined the group of officers.

The soldiers spread out in diverging files and rode right around the monastery until there was not a square yard through which a fugitive might hope to burst his way. Then the officers and the man in black advanced towards the monastery and disappeared from the view of the watchers.

They were absent for several minutes. At last they reappeared, two leading Tinker. Benton gave a cry of dismay, but Blake only chuckled.

"Don't worry, Bob," he said. "No harm will come to him."

"You will rescue him, Mr. Blake?" the lad urged, as a great wave flushed over his honest young face.

"Ay, when the proper times comes!" Blake replied. "See! They are putting him on a horse! I wonder what's passing in Tinker's mind at the present moment."

They saw Tinker mount a powerful charger, and the man in black, who looked a very indifferent horseman, rose up alongside him. The cavalcade closed in around the twain, the strains of the bugle were wafted in the air, and the troops moved forward. They rode down the hill and into the valley. As the rearguard followed, the flashlight suddenly went out. And all was darkness again.

Blake opened the hamper and began a hearty meal. Bob Benton was restless and he could not conceal his dismay at Tinker's capture. Nor could he understand how Blake could take the disaster so calmly. For a time he watched the great detective in silence, but at last he felt compelled to speak.

"This is an awful business, Mr. Blake," he began. "And what worries me more than anything else is that Tinker should be nabbed when befriending me. You don't think they'll be very rough to him, do you? I'm longing to start after them and try to get him away."

"You saw that fellow in black, Bob, eh?" Blake asked, as he cut himself a big hunk of bread.

"Yes."

"That was the Lord Chancellor's messenger! And he's riding alongside Tinker! Isn't that so?"

"Yes. I noticed that."

"I don't envy the messenger," Blake went on. "He'll get into big trouble."

"Why?"

"Because he thinks his work here is done and that he can get back to London, and that he'll be complimented and perhaps rewarded by the Lord Chancellor. Ha, ha, ha! He's just the sort who would exaggerate his adventures and perils to an admiring circle of acquaintances who have never even crossed the Channel to France. My word! What a shock he'll have when the truth is discovered!"

"What do you mean?" Bob Benton asked eagerly. "You don't think that——"

"I mean that he and all the troops feel certain that they've got you safely in their clutches," Blake replied, with a chuckle. "They're all delighted, I'm sure. No more camping out on cold nights, no more living on rations, no more marching and counter-marching. Their instructions were to catch you and escort you to barracks. And they've got Tinker, and he's not the chap to give the show away. Treat him roughly?—not likely! He'll be in clover from this on. Isn't he supposed to be a ward of the British Lord Chancellor, hasn't the Swiss Government bestirred itself on his account, must not he be a British milord of considerable importance when such a fuss has been made about him? I really do believe that Tinker would not be at all grateful to us if we hurried after them and told the truth.

The lad was looking forward to a comfortable bed and a good meal, and he knows he'll get all that and any amount of attention. No, no, don't worry about him. He's enjoying the situation, I'm certain, and fooling them all to his heart's content."

"I never thought of all that," Bob Benton replied gleefully. "Good old Tinker! I hope he'll have a jolly time! But won't they be awfully savage when they find out the truth, Mr. Blake? They'll turn on him then?"

"I'm not certain that the Swiss authorities will discover their mistake until he is out of their clutches," Blake replied. "That depends upon what success we have in the meantime. The messenger may carry the lad over to London in state, and the Lord Chancellor may be the first to discover what is amiss. He'll be very wrathful, I have no doubt, but he can't do anything spiteful to Tinker. And Tinker can hold his own against most people, I can tell you, Bob. He's ready with his tongue as he is with his fists. But come along, that meal has freshened me up, and there's work for us to do."

"Where are we to go to?" Bob Benton asked eagerly, jumping to his feet. "I feel as fit as a fiddle again, and I can march any number of miles you like. I've often longed for the chance of working with you."

"We're going back the way we came, having regard to the turn events have taken," Blake replied. "And we'll have to go very cautiously. I'm glad you had that rest of some days in the monastery, my lad, for it has restored your health, and we're likely to have a rough time before us. Now follow me, and don't speak on the way. We can't know the moment we may be in danger."

Blake began the descent, and Pedro, seeing his master's stealthy stride, went on a few paces in front, moving slowly and listening intently. Young Bob Benton followed the great detective, the lad's heart thumping with pride and excitement, and thus they reached the level ground and the monastery. Blake drew in close to the walls and paused. Gradually he reached the front of the monastery, and there he stopped again and stood motionless for several seconds. Being satisfied at last that no one was about, he descended into the valley, following in the wake of the retiring soldiers, and as he came to the village he saw that the good folk there, despite the lateness of the hour, had come out of their houses, and were eagerly discussing the reason that had induced the troops to quit the neighbourhood.

Blake stood some distance away until they had returned to their beds, and then he got up and led the way through the gorge to Drogen's house, which he had visited with one of the monks on the day he had discovered that Drogen was one of Lutzatti's gang. A light was shining through the window pane, and Blake, gripping Bob Benton by the arm, drew him into the shadow of a tree.

"That cottage yonder belongs to a man through whom I tracked Lutzatti when I was looking for you," he whispered. "The fellow is a rogue and altogether in Lutzatti's power. He served my turn before and he will serve it again to-night. That light is not shining at this hour without good reason. It is a beacon, Bob! A beacon to tell the gang that the coast is clear!"

CHAPTER 32.

The Fight at Splugaren.

BOB BENTON, in his eagerness, was about to slip forward into the middle of the road so as to get a better view of the cottage when Blake quickly dragged him back.

"Do not stir!" he said, in a tense whisper. "Enemies may be lurking around, and if we are detected we will be overwhelmed. Our only chance is to wait and watch and to strike when we get the chance."

As he spoke he was looking quickly up and down the road, and now he stepped back farther, dragging the lad with him.

"Some are coming already!" he said. "We are only just in time! See! Three men are moving stealthily along close to the furze-bushes yonder!"

Bob looked in the direction Blake indicated and noticed three slouching figures. They were creeping cautiously along, each carried a rifle, and they stopped and listened continually as they approached the cottage. When close to it, they made a quick movement forward, hurried through the doorway, and next moment the light was extinguished. The lad's heart was thumping hard. This truly was a new and exciting experience to him. He gazed up at Blake, his face aglow and his eyes shining.

"What do you think they are up to, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"Time will show," Blake replied quietly. "Keep cool, Bob, and follow me in everything I do. They are a dangerous crowd, as I have good reason to know."

Five minutes passed before the men emerged, and they were accompanied by Drogen. The four scoundrels, all carrying rifles, moved off at a sharp pace, and Blake and Bob Benton followed them, the former holding Pedro on the leash. They struck out along the mountain, walking quickly and continually, as if certain of their destination, and they never once looked back. Up the mountain-side occasionally, across wind-swept plateaus, down into valleys, they tramped, marching two and two, and Bob Benton was hard set to keep up with Blake, who followed them persistently and never seemed to tire. The lad was glad when Blake stopped as the villains disappeared over the side of a cliff.

"I know this place, and we must proceed cautiously," he said. "I have been here before, and I shall be surprised if you do not see something you don't expect in a couple of minutes. Walk warily. We must not give them cause for alarm."

They advanced to the edge of the precipice and looked down. A glade was beneath, the same glade in which Blake and Tinker had seen the gang awaiting the arrival of Lutzatti on former occasions, and now, as then, a crowd of men were gathered there. But on this occasion they were all armed. Blake smiled as he watched them.

"Lutzatti is a daring scoundrel!" he murmured. "He stops at nothing. There is going to be warm work to-night, Bob. As soon as he arrives these scoundrels will—— Ah, here he comes!"

Once again Lutzatti stepped into the glade and advanced towards the gang. He too was carrying a rifle, and his advent was the immediate occasion of hurry amongst his confederates. They fell into line, about fifty in all, and the bandit chief began a quick and thorough inspection. Bob Benton stared down in amazement. The scene reminded him of military manœuvres. Presently the villains formed up two and two, and, headed by Lutzatti, they began to march away. Blake proceeded to follow them.

"Why, they're like trained troops!" the lad gasped. "And they mean mischief, Mr. Blake, that's certain! But who are they going to attack?"

"They have served their time in the Army, as all men out here are compelled to do," Blake replied. "And they're going to release Tinker, if they can, believing that it is you who is captured, my lad. We'll keep pegging away after them, that's all. Our chance will come when the scrimmage begins. Leastways, I hope so!"

The bandits set out at a steady pace, and swung along untiringly. After marching for three hours they halted for half an hour, and then they resumed their march. Though unused to such long journeys under such conditions, and though still out of condition after the privations he had undergone, Bob Benton was now so full of excitement by this strange adventure that he did not feel the weariness that would otherwise have beset him, and he plodded doggedly by Blake's side.

All through the night they tramped, and it was close on daybreak when the villains halted again and had a hurried consultation. Half a dozen were pushed forward to reconnoitre, and the rest took cover in a wood. On beyond, the roofs and chimneys of a town were dimly visible.

"Do you know this locality, too, Mr. Blake?" Bob asked, as, following the example of the bandits, they sat down to rest, whilst Pedro, standing like a statue, gazed across the stretch of country towards the wood.

"Yes. That town yonder is called Splugaren. I had an exciting time there when I was looking for you, Bob," the great detective explained. "Lutzatti once lived there, but I don't think he has visited the place since I caught him. I fancy the troops must have halted in the town for the night, and he wants to attack them before they are ready for the march again."

It seemed a long time to Bob Benton before the bandit's scouts came hurrying back, and evidently the information they had to give was of an encouraging nature, for the villains were quickly on their feet after their return, and the whole force pushed forward once more, with Blake and Bob Benton following as before. But now the gang marched more stealthily, and as the outskirts of the sleeping town were reached they broke up into small parties, which struck off at different angles so as to reach the town from various quarters.

Blake, observing these tactics, realised Lutzatti's object, and determined to make straight for the market-place.

"That villain is full of resource," he said, as he explained his intention to Bob. "His confederates will gather together or scatter, just as circumstances require, and the troops will be quite puzzled to deal with them. The soldiers are billeted in all the houses in the town, and if Lutzatti knows where Tinker is lodged, half a dozen men could easily rush the guard there, whilst the other scoundrels could create a disturbance in different localities, and draw the troops after them. But the cream of the joke is with us, Bob. How amazed and disgusted Lutzatti will be if he finds out that he has taken all this trouble only to run up against Tinker!"

He was moving forward again as he spoke, and before long he and Bob Benton were entering the town. They advanced with the utmost caution, halting at every corner, looking back continually, with rifles ready in their hands to repel a sudden attack.

The town lay in sleep. The houses were dark, the streets were empty; there was not a sound. Suddenly a bugle rang forth far away. It was followed by a sharp fusillade, and the bugle-cry was taken up by another in a different quarter. Rifle-shots rang out continually, hoarse commands came floating across the darkness, away in the distance the banging of doors and the clatter of feet arose.

Blake sprang forward.

"Follow me!" he cried. "I know the way!"

He darted off, holding Pedro, straining at the leash, and Bob Benton followed impetuously. Out of the narrow streets and into the market-place Blake sped. There troops were running at the double. Some of them were across the square already, others, with tunics unbuttoned and rifles tilghtly grasped, were straggling after them. Some were dashing out of the houses, and a score or more were surging from the inn. And all were going in the same direction, towards the locality where the firing was gaining in volume.

Blake ran in through the yard door and made for the back of the inn. The door there was open, and he ran along the passage. The last of the soldiers were rushing out, and the great detective's footsteps re-echoed through the house as he sped along. He banged the hall door and locked and barred it. Running into the rooms on the ground-floor, he closed and barred them, and shouting to Bob Benton to secure the back of the house, he dashed up the stairs.

"Tinker!" he shouted. "Are you here?"

No answer.

He ran from room to room. All were in a state of utmost disorder. Coming out on to the landing, panting and disappointed, he paused for a moment; then he dashed towards the secret chamber, touched the hidden spring, and stumbled in. The place was in darkness. As he dived his hand into his pocket to extract his electric lamp he received a tremendous blow on the back of the head that sent him staggering against a wall, and a burly figure swept past him.

The man had reached the door, but he did not get farther. With a hoarse bay, Pedro, springing up the stairs, brought Blake's assailant to the floor, and the plucky detective, shaken and half stunned, touched his lamp, and a beam of light revealed the room. The noble bloodhound was standing over the villain, and the villain was Blobbs!

Bob Benton came tumbling up the stairs, and gave a cry of astonishment as he witnessed the scene. Blake recognised Blobbs, and shouted to Bob to guard the door. Rummaging amidst a pile of rubbish, Blake found a good length of rope, and bound the scoundrel so tightly that he yelled. Ignoring his protests, Blake seized him by the coat-collar and pulled him into the middle of the room. Then he glanced hastily around. Tinker's cap was lying on the floor.

Quick as lightning Blake picked it up and held it under Pedro's nozzle. The hound at once displayed extraordinary excitement. He scudded round the room and then down the stairs, and Blake shouted to Bob Benton.

"Let him out, Bob!" he cried. "He'll follow Tinker's trail; and the lad may be in danger!"

Bob Benton opened the hall door, and Pedro dashed out. The lad swiftly closed and bolted the door again, and was hurrying back to Blake, when a mighty uproar arose outside. The door shook under heavy blows, rifle-shots rang out, and the windows in the top rooms were pierced by bullets. Bob Benton stopped, and Blake rushed down the stairs.

"Lutzatti's gang!" he cried. "It is happening just as I expected. Some of them created a disturbance at the far end of the town, so that all the troops would be drawn from here, and now the scoundrels are attacking the inn in the hope of getting you!"

"But they couldn't know that I had just arrived here!" Bob gasped.

"No. But they thought that it was you, and not Tinker, who had been captured," Blake replied. "They heard that the lad who had been taken from the monastery had been lodged here for the night. Come along! We must keep them at bay till the troops come back. If we don't succeed, it will go hard with both of us. Follow me up to the roof!"

Creeping out on to the roof, and keeping under the shelter of the coping, Blake and Bob Benton looked down. The gang were swarming around the inn; the townspeople were rushing from their houses, shouting in terror; away in the distance the firing was still continuing, and wreaths of smoke were rising in the early dawn. Blake raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired, and a scoundrel tumbled his length on the muddy ground. Again a bullet whistled from the roof, and another villain pitched forward. But as a panic seemed to be at hand, a stentorian voice vibrated through the street:

"Smash in the door! Don't hesitate! We will soon be out of danger!"

It was Lutzatti urging on his confederates; and once again they hurled themselves against the door. Even up on the roof Blake could hear the splintering of wood and the shattering of glass, and he fired repeatedly.

"Loose off, Bob!" he cried. "We are fighting for our lives!"

The two rifles rattled continually; men swayed and tumbled; yells of pain were mingled with hoarse imprecations and shouts of triumph. The door gave way, and the ruffians rushed in.

But at this moment, as Blake sprang to the trapdoor leading out to the roof, there prepared to make his last stand, a body of soldiers swept around the corner of the square. Pedro was leading them by a dozen yards, and Tinker, too, was well in front.

A loud cheer of encouragement from the troops as they dashed towards the inn was heard in terror by the bandits, who a few moments before were flushed by the certainty of success. They stopped, turned round, realised their danger, and with one accord they broke away. Scattering as they ran, they raced in every direction in the hope of escape, and Blake gripped Bob Benton by the arm.

"Down again to the secret chamber!" he cried. "We must hide for the present. Tinker will join us there, I feel sure."

CHAPTER 33.

Reunited.

WITHOUT a moment's hesitation Bob sprang through the trapdoor after Blake and rushed down the stairs and into the secret chamber. Blake banged the door when both were inside. They could hear firing still, and yells and answering cries, and presently the clatter of footsteps in the house. There was a heavy bump against the door. Next moment it was thrust open, and Tinker tumbled in. All was still in darkness, and the lad was panting heavily. Blake felt a cold nozzle pressed against his hand, and he knew that Pedro, too, was in the room, and before he could draw forth his pocket-lamp, Tinker was grumbling as he staggered over the prostrate form of Blobbs.

"Well, I'm blowed!" the lad gasped. "Is this a menagerie, with all sorts of crocodiles all over the place, or——"

He fell as he spoke over Blobbs's legs, and the light flashed out.

"Great Scott!" Tinker gasped as he looked up. "Am I awake? Is that Mr. Blake, or——"

"Hist! You'll be overheard!" Blake interjected, stifling a chuckle. "Yes, I'm here, my lad, and Bob Benton, too! And that is Blobbs at your feet. We're all together again, thank goodness! But we must slip away quietly when we get the chance. The soldiers have orders to arrest me, you know, and I must keep free to capture Datchford, and Lutzatti, and Galard. So Pedro found you all right. What happened after you were caught at the monastery?"

Tinker grinned.

"That was a lark, wasn't it, sir?" he suggested, as he picked himself up. "Why, they took me for Benton, and they were delighted, I can tell you! I held my tongue, and let them march me off, and the monks didn't give the show away. They took me here, and no sooner was I in the place than I bolted up the stairs and came into this room. You should have heard them tramping about looking for me! I sat down and laughed till my sides ached, and the chap the Lord Chancellor sent to nab Benton raved and growled something terrible.

"They thought I'd bolted out of the inn at last, and gave up the search and went to bed. And I had a snooze, too. And then I was awakened by the firing outside and the clatter here, and I made a dash away. I'd got out of the town, when Pedro overtook me, and I was surprised, and no mistake. Good old dog! He wheeled round and galloped back this way, and I guessed that he was leading me to you, so I followed, of course. And I heard the firing here then, and as I raced along the soldiers heard it, too, and came after me. And when I saw that, I made for this room—and here we are!"

As Tinker stopped, the troops were entering the inn again, and men went tramping everywhere. Officers were giving sharp, crisp orders; the rank and file were sulky, and were grumbling as they stamped about. It was evident to the watchers in the secret chamber that the soldiers were puzzled by the attack that had been made, and were at a loss to understand the reason.

Tinker, chuckling at their discomfiture, glanced casually down at Blobbs, and the expression of his face changed.

"Where did you find him, sir?" he asked.

"In this room," Blake replied. "And the cur attacked me. He nearly got away, too, but Pedro bowled him over."

Blobbs looked up. His face was twitching and pallid, terror was in his eyes. Blake dragged him to a chair and seated him in it, bound as he was.

"So I've run you down at last," he began. "You tried to hoodwink me when I was in London, but I think you must see now that the game is up. I've been one too many for you at the end, and you'd best make a clean breast of everything. You'll have to stand your trial, of course, but if you tell me the truth now, I'll mention that fact to the judge in mitigation of your punishment later on."

Before Blobbs could speak, Bob Benton, with a look of complete surprise, sprang forward.

"I know him!" he gasped. "I thought from the first that I had seen him before, but I couldn't be sure. That is Sinclair Bevan—the man who got me to leave the cave near Halsford, and who took me out here and handed me over to Lutzatti! Mr. Blake, he's a callous villain, and——"

"Quite so, Bob," Blake interjected quickly. "I made that discovery some time ago. But don't get excited; don't raise your voice, or the soldiers will hear you! Leave this scoundrel to me; I know how to deal with him!"

Blobbs looked imploringly at Blake.

"I'll tell all," he muttered, moistening his lips and trembling all over. "I'll rely on your mercy!"

"You've got fifty thousand pounds belonging to Robert Benton!" Blake replied sternly. "Do you deny that?"

The villain gazed in amazement at the astute detective.

"How do you know?" he gasped.

"I found it out in London. Galard gave it to you," Blake said. "I examined his bank-book, and traced the cheques to you."

"Yes, I have that amount, less what I gave Lutzatti," Blobbs admitted. "He had ten thousand pounds from me, and he didn't think that enough!"

"That ten thousand pounds came into my possession," Blake explained. "I found ten notes each for a thousand pounds in this very room, and I gave one to Mr. Dunstan, the Official Receiver in Galard's bankruptcy, as evidence that I was interested in the case, and, of course, he will return it to me when I get back to London. You will have to refund that forty thousand you still have, or the judge will know how to deal with you! Where is it now?"

"Lodged in my name and Datchford's in the General Cosmopolitan Bank," Blobbs replied.

"All right! Then fifty thousand pounds is accounted for. Now about the other fifty thousand. Where is that?"

"Galard has that."

"And where is Galard?"

"He is a prisoner in Lutzatti's clutches."

"Why?"

"Because he refuses to give all that Lutzatti demands."

"How did Lutzatti get hold of him?"

Blobbs winced, and seemed disposed to prevaricate; but Blake's dark, piercing eyes were gazing steadily at him, and the villain quailed.

"I'd better explain," he groaned. "Galard got all the money at first, and he arranged to give us seventy thousand pounds, and take thirty thousand himself and leave London. We said we'd keep everything quiet until he was well away, and then we'd tell Sir Henry Fastow when Galard could not be caught."

"You and Datchford were to get the lion's share, then?" Blake said scornfully.

"Galard was a poor man, and he was on the verge of bankruptcy, and he had nothing to lose by leaving London," Blobbs replied desperately. "He was quite willing to take that sum at first, but when he got all the money into his hands he only sent us fifty thousand pounds. Just then Sir Henry Fastow died, and Datchford called on you. Meantime, Galard had gone down to Halsford and had kidnapped Benton, because if Benton disappeared then there would be no one to claim the property. Datchford and I were friends with Galard at that time, but when we found out how he had served us, I, too, went down to Halsford and took Benton out of the cave and away from Galard."

"And you thus got a hold over Galard?" Blake suggested.

"Yes. We knew he couldn't harm us. We could show him up, but his word would not be taken before ours, for we had a good name and were well known, and he had already a bad one."

"Go on!"

"Galard followed me out to Switzerland, and he went to meet Lutzatti, not knowing the kind of man he was. Lutzatti made him a prisoner, though, and holds him still."

"Then Galard hoped that Lutzatti would give Benton up?"

"Yes. But they have never come to terms."

"And why did Lutzatti make a prisoner of Datchford? I found him in one of the bandit's lairs," Blake went on.

"To get more money out of him, too!" Blobbs groaned. "Lutzatti is grasping. He puts the screw on everyone, and he knew that he had us all in his clutches."

Blake turned to Tinker.

"It was Galard we saw that night we followed the man who looked like a tourist from Drogen's cottage," he said. "Lutzatti's gang seized him, and they were startled when they saw me in the dress of a monk. And Galard recognised me, though I didn't know him. Don't you remember? He ran away from me."

Tinker nodded.

"This scoundrel has been speaking the truth for once in his life," Blake went on, scornfully indicating Blobbs. "Now we know all, and a difficult business it has been to unravel this mystery. Thank goodness, we've got Bob safe and sound at last, and we also have half his fortune back, but we still have to find the other half, if possible. I must slip away now, and you had better stay here."

"Where are you going, sir?" Tinker asked anxiously.

"I'm going after Lutzatti," Blake replied. "He said when last we parted that he only hoped he'd meet me again! Well, it won't be my fault if we don't come face to face!"

"And why shouldn't we go with you?" Tinker urged. "Three of us together would be a match for a good crowd! And what's the use——"

"You forget that you will have plenty to do here," Blake replied. "You must guard Bob at all costs, and you must take care that the villain yonder doesn't escape. That is enough responsibility even for you, my lad, but I trust to your ability and resource to succeed. Ah, the house is quieting down at last! Before long I will be able to leave."

Tinker did not offer any further objection to Blake's decision; he saw the wisdom it contained, and cheerfully acquiesced. Leading Pedro to the door, Blake opened it slightly and listened intently. The lower part of the inn was empty, as far as he could see. Nodding farewell, he stepped lightly down the stairs and crossed the passage. Opening the hall door and leaving it ajar, he hurried round a corner and entered one of the streets. Here the townsfolk were gathered in small groups eagerly discussing the amazing succession of incidents that had occurred in the last few hours in their midst; and the great detective, with nothing distinctive about his dress, passed unobserved in the general excitement. But he was glad when once again he was out of the town and climbing a hill. As he reached the summit he paused for a moment and looked back.

The soldiers were mounting their horses and preparing to ride away.

"They're going to scour the country again for Bob Benton, I suppose," he murmured. "Poor chaps! I'd like to save them all the useless trouble they're bound to have, but I can only think of the duty that still rests on me. Come on, Pedro! We've a long tramp before us!"

CHAPTER 34.

Face to Face Again.

THE sky was overcast, sullen clouds were banking together, and a keen wind was blowing as Blake crossed the pass leading through Mount Mogtorf and stopped at the far end for a few moments to rest. He was in the wildest part of Switzerland; giant cliffs soared on every side, the valleys were strewn with rocks, and down the steep ribs of the mountains boulders rumbled occasionally as they tumbled into the ravines, and tons of snow, loosened by a recent thaw, fell continually in avalanches. And now the frost was close at hand again, and a heavy snowstorm was threatening.

Two days and two nights had passed since he left Splugaren, and exposure to the elements and toil and hardship had left their mark upon him. His clothes were frayed and muddy, his face was rough and unshorn, his eyes were jaded and his limbs ached. But the indomitable courage that had sustained him throughout the journey was as strong as ever, and he strode along, making little of his sufferings and with mind intent only on the object that had sent him forth.

Doggedly, persistently, and patiently he had followed Lutzatti through the winding course that villain had deliberately selected in order to baffle pursuit; he had tracked him along the rough-hewn paths and across the rivers and through the plains and up the mountain-sides, turning and twisting as the scared ruffian ahead had done before, following him with relentless pertinacity, and now he knew him to be close at hand.

For, back in the pass, less than a quarter of a mile away, he had come across signs of a hurried meal, partaken but half an hour before; the twigs with which the water had been heated were still smouldering, the footprints around the spot were still fresh, the crumbs of bread had not yet softened in the muddy ground. Like a sleuthhound Blake had followed the trail, and now he rested for a few moments, gathering his strength together for the final drama which was to be played to a finish in that bleak, lonely setting. And as he rested he consulted the map which he had found in the secret room in the inn at Splugaren, the map which he had used once before when he had sought to rescue Bob Benton and had released Datchford in his stead, and looking at it now, and glancing around the panorama stretched out on all sides, he knew that he was near one of Lutzatti's hiding-places, and that caution only was needed in order to catch the bandit chief before he had time to rest there and move on again.

Blake smoked his pipe thoughtfully, and as he knocked out the ashes and returned it to his pocket he looked down at Pedro, who answered the glance with a blink of his bloodshot eyes and the wagging of his tail. Pedro was ready to resume the journey. He had plodded on steadily, as if he knew what lay ahead, and was resolved not to tire himself needlessly; now, as Blake jumped to his feet, the noble hound moved off as quietly as his master. They toiled up the steep cliff and reached the summit, where the wind whistled shrilly, and stray snowflakes curled and twisted dazzlingly, and Blake, turning to the right, tramped along, with coat-collar turned up and head bent to the gusts. The cold was piercing, the wind was moaning, the ground up here, covered with frozen puddles, was slippery and dangerous. They descended into a dip of sixty feet, and scaled the opposite height, and bearing away down a narrow path, they climbed boulders and skirted round yawning precipices, Blake sometimes clinging to the rocks to avoid being swept off his feet and hurled to destruction.

At last they reached a small plateau, and there Blake paused. Over at the far end, up against a granite rock, rising to a height of fifty feet, a rough shelter had been erected. Branches of dead trees, twigs, and wild ferns had been interlaced and matted, and old canvas bags had been fastened across the top as shelter from the rain. Now the snow was falling faster; the hut, if such it could be called, was half hidden in the wind-driven flakes; the scene was unutterably lonely and miserable; this, in truth, was the last resting-place for forsaken man. And Lutzatti was there—Lutzatti, who once had held an honourable position; who had been respected by his fellows; who had turned to evil, and even then had wielded power greater than the State; whose name had struck terror into the hearts of the law-abiding; who had defied his Government, and yet had lived and amassed ill-gotten wealth, and had ruled a band of desperadoes with an iron hand. Now he was alone, driven to bay by the genius and courage of one man, forsaken by his confederates, with a price upon his head, without hope in his heart, at his last lair, grimly resolved, like a wild animal at bay, to fight to the death, and only panting for revenge. Blake could well picture the feelings of the desperate and savage man. He knew that Lutzatti was only waiting for the moment when they should meet and close in deadly combat.

The great detective stood and gazed at the hut long and silently. Sometimes the blinding snow hid it absolutely from sight, sometimes, as the wind fell, he caught a glimpse of it for a moment. He did not know if Lutzatti was armed, but he shrewdly suspected that this might be the case. He had no intention of advancing to the hut, and thus making a target of himself for Lutzatti to fire at, at his own convenience. Bending down, he gathered a pile of stones together, and lying behind those, with Pedro at his side, he raised his rifle.

Bang!

The shot rang out, echoing along the mountain crags and rolling away fitfully for several seconds. Blake gazed at the hut. There was no movement there. He had aimed his first shot at the rock, a couple of feet above the roof, and now he fired into the hut itself. Still no movement. He fired a third and fourth time in quick succession, and as the echoes died away a laugh rang forth, a laugh bitter, venomous and unnatural. Then something white fluttered in front of the hut, and Blake, who was about to fire again, lowered his rifle quickly.

A man stepped forward. He was unarmed. He walked deliberately to the centre of the plateau with arms folded across his chest, and there was a certain dignity in his stride which no coward could possibly display. The man was Lutzatti, his clothes hanging loosely on a gaunt frame which still was full of strength, his head bare, his powerful features set in sullen defiance, his eyes flashing contemptuously. He stood in the centre of the plateau for several seconds, whilst Blake watched him silently, and at last he spoke, and his hoarse voice was full of scorn.

"You British dog! Why don't you shoot?" he cried.

Blake stood up, and motioned to Pedro not to stir. Carrying his rifle, he advanced, and Lutzatti did not budge. Even the expression on his face did not change, except that his upper lip curled a trifle more. Blake stopped when five paces separated them, and for ten seconds neither spoke. Then Lutzatti laughed again.

"Why do you hesitate?" he scoffed. "Do you think I am afraid?"

Blake lowered his rifle.

"Come! What is it you want?" he asked coldly. "I don't fire at an unarmed man, and well you know it. Is this a trick?"

Lutzatti shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no weapon!" he said. "You can search me if you like."

Blake laid his rifle on the ground without a moment's hesitation, and walked close to the bandit.

"Now I'm ready," he replied. "If you are unarmed, and I believe that you are, then I do not wish to take any advantage of you. But first come back with me to where the bloodhound is lying, for I couldn't undertake to keep him off you if you attacked me. and he was free.

Lutzatti nodded, and stepped to Blake's side. Together they strolled across the plateau, and as the bandit drew near Pedro raised himself and bared his teeth. Blake patted the noble hound, slipped the leash on to his collar, and securely fastened him to a stump. Then he joined Lutzatti. again. They walked back slowly to the middle of the plateau, shoulder to shoulder, as if they were the best of friends. It would have been a strange sight, could any onlooker have seen them and have known that in a few moments they were to fight for their lives. Both men were cool, and the sneer had passed away from Lutzatti's face.

"Mr. Blake, there are few men whom I respect, but you are one exception," he said. "You are brave and honourable! You could have shot me at sight, and any of these gendarmes who have tried to hound me down would have done so for a certainty, and have gloried in the deed. Why did you stay your hand?"

"Because you showed courage, and also because I can't take an advantage of another's weakness, and because, for that matter, I object always to sacrificing human life," Blake replied. "I hope even now that I won't have to go so far; I mean to make you my prisoner."

"And if you succeed in that you will hand me over to the Swiss authorities, and I will be flung into a dark dungeon for the rest of my life," Lutzatti replied. "Therefore, you leave me no alternative! Yet I would spare you if I could. To save myself I must——"

He stopped. Blake nodded.

"Why did you lay yourself out to catch me?" Lutzatti asked, with sudden fierceness. "Were it not for you, I would have had nothing to fear! I cared nought for the authorities here! I snapped my fingers at them! But you must come this way, and now—now——"

He looked up at the sky. The snow was falling fast; his clothes and Blake's were spotted white.

"I should never have heard of you if you had not held Robert Benton a prisoner," Blake replied; "but there is no false sentiment about me, and though I admire your courage, yet that is all I can say on your behalf. I told you once what I thought of you, and I am glad I came across your trail. Men like you are a curse to society, and those who defy the law, and take to crime, must suffer the consequences. Yours has been a shocking bad record. I am glad to feel that I am the instrument selected by justice to end it. Come! I have no wish for further speech with you. Get ready at once!"

Lutzatti's face flushed red, and the scowl swept over it again. Blake's words had aroused his hatred once again, and he flung off his coat and rolled up his shirt-sleeves, thus displaying a pair of tremendously powerful arms. The muscles were standing out in knots. Blake took off his coat, folded it, and laid it on the ground. He, too, bared his arms, and both crouched slightly, and gazed into one another's eyes.

"Are you ready?" Blake said.

"Yes! And may——"

The sentence was never finished, for, gritting his teeth, Lutzatti cut speech short and sprang forward. And at that moment Pedro uttered a terrific bay. Blake jumped to one side, and caught the villain by the shoulder. Lutzatti stumbled round, and Blake had time to grip him in both arms, and he dragged him to the ground. But with a swiftness that showed that the last few days' hardship had not weakened his strength or shaken his nerve, the villain twisted round and gripped Blake with a strength equal to the great detective's. They fought like tigers on the ground, neither able to leap upon the other, and, meantime, Pedro's deep shouts echoed savagely at the end of the plateau. Finding that he could not gain the mastery thus, and realising that in a long struggle Blake would probably wear him down, Lutzatti, when his opportunity came, rolled a yard away, and was on his feet with astonishing nimbleness.

But not sooner than Blake, who anticipated some such ruse. They clashed together again, each hoping to gain the advantage, and stumbling, twisting, swaying, and panting heavily, they staggered in a circle of a few yards. They were silent, nursing every ounce of strength, but the hoarse bays of the noble hound, tied to the stump, and unable to assist his master, re-echoed in increasing anguish around the mountain-peaks. Again Blake got a firm grip on the villain, and lifted him off his feet. Lutzatti went to the ground heavily, with Blake on top, and this time the gallant detective knew that he could keep him pinned.

But Lutzatti clasped his iron arms around Blake so that he could not rise, and a mocking laugh came from his drawn lips.

"I've got him!" he yelled. "Hurry! Hurry!"

On the instant a man sprang from the shelter of the hut, and ran at full speed across the plateau. With one swift glance Blake took in the situation, and now he knew the imminent peril in which he fought. He gripped Lutzatti by the throat and tried to wrench himself free, but the villain clung to him with a ferocity that knew no pain.

"You treacherous scoundrel!" Blake gasped, as he struggled in the few moments left to him for freedom. "You vile coward! Is this your gratitude after all?"

"You have brought it on yourself!" Lutzatti panted. "It was no wish of mine, but I must live!"

The man was running almost with reckless steps. But he was not making for the spot where Blake and Lutzatti wrestled. The detective's rifle was lying twenty yards distant, and he meant to seize it. Blake almost staggered to his feet, lifting Lutzatti as he rose, but the latter tripped him, and again they fell.

"Hurry, Datchford!" Lutzatti yelled. "Fire, whilst you have the chance!"

The villainous solicitor, bedraggled and half starving, caring nothing except for his own safety, and knowing that Blake's death alone could save him from disgrace and the punishment he so fully deserved, clutched at the rifle and hurried towards the combatants. All had happened in a few moments. Though Lutzatti was purple in the face, though his eyes were bulging in his head, though his breath was waning fast, yet he held on to Blake with unyielding tenacity, knowing that a few more agonising moments would bring Datchford to his side. Blake was wrestling with all his force; but, despite that fact, he saw the yellow features and the cold, pitiless eyes of Datchford emerging through the curling snowflakes, and he knew that the rifle was at the coward's shoulder. With one twist he swung round in a final attempt to break away.

"Fire!" Lutzatti gasped. "Fire!"

Datchford's hands were trembling. Pedro had ceased baying. The coward was fumbling for the trigger. There was a pad of feet, a stumble over a trailing leash and a swift recovery, and Pedro was in the air, making straight for Datchford. A crash, and a rifle-shot followed simultaneously, and with a groan Lutzatti rolled over on his side. And as Datchford fell in a heap the rifle rattled to the ground from his nerveless fingers.

Blake staggered to his feet.

"Thanks to Pedro, he missed his mark, and I am still alive!" he gasped. "And——" He paused, and looked down at the still form on the ground. "Yes, and Lutzatti is dead! Justice has triumphed after all!"

CHAPTER 35.

The Lord Chancellor Retracts.

BLAKE gazed in silence at Lutzatti for some moments. Then he walked towards Datchford.

"You have killed him!" he said. "In attempting to take my life you have slain your partner in crime. You will never return to England again; you will never leave Switzerland; here, in the solitude of a dungeon, you will expiate you guilt. Unhappy man! Remorse will be your lot until the grave closes over you, too!"

Datchford lay without moving. His face was hidden in his hands; he did not dare to look at the great-hearted detective whom he had attacked in such a cowardly way. Blake walked back, and bent over the prostrate form of Lutzatti. He examined his pockets, and, after some searching, he drew forth a packet of letters. He read them all attentively whilst the soft snow fell on him, and on the dead man's figure, and on Datchford, cowering with fear, and on Pedro, sitting by Datchford, with his splendid head turned towards his master. Blake compared one of the letters with the map which had been his guide, and then he put all the documents in his pocket. He crossed back to Datchford, and touched him gently with his foot.

"Get up, and walk into yonder hut," he said.

Datchford staggered to his feet, and, with shaking limbs, he blundered unsteadily forward. His face had grown ten years older in those few minutes; its expression now was terrible to look upon. He was haggard, half dazed, wholly terrified, and helplessly in despair. When they reached the hut, Blake bound him so that there was no chance of his escape, and called to Pedro to follow. Consulting his map again, he crossed to the far side of the mountain, came down into the valley, and tramped towards a distant range of hills. All that day he marched along, stopping only once at a farmhouse to partake of a hurried meal, and evening was closing in, and the snow was still falling, as he took a narrow path that led him between two hills. When half-way across the ravine he walked slowly, examining the right side of the ravine at every step, and, finally, he climbed up the hill by a goat-path, now covered with snow. Only such observant eyes as his could have detected it on such an evening.

He walked along the crest of the hill, and presently he came to what at first sight looked like a large mound of snow. But walking round it, he found an entrance to a grotto made of small stones. Bending down, he entered it. A trestle-bed was there, and it was empty; an iron hook was affixed to the floor, which consisted of a large, flat rock, several yards in width; a long chain attached to the hook was lying on the floor. Blake picked it up and examined it attentively.

"It's been filed through!" he said. "He's got away!"

He went out into the open air again, and stood lost in thought, whilst Pedro moved around the grotto. Suddenly observing the hound, he re-entered the grotto, and searched more carefully. Calling to Pedro, he held forward a fragment of torn clothing which he had found on the trestle-bed, and the hound nosed it eagerly.

"Follow him, old boy!" Blake said. "Fetch him out!"

Pedro trotted out of the grotto. He led the way straight across the top of the hill, and Blake followed with extreme difficulty. The snow here was piled in drifts; sometimes Blake was up to his ankles, sometimes even to his knees; once he sank almost to his waist. Pedro went on without a halt, and in this fashion they covered half a dozen miles. Then the hound became more eager every hundred yards; at last he bayed loudly, his head forward, and his tail wagging; the scent was getting hot. Finally he stopped and began pawing the ground furiously. Blake hurried up to him.

The reason of Pedro's excitement was soon made manifest. Blake helped him to part the snow, and there, lying unconscious, was the form of a man, tall and angular, dressed in a tweed jacket, knickerbockers, long stockings, and thick boots. Blake dragged him out of the snow, and worked hard to restore his circulation. At last he was successful. The man groaned, and opened his eyes. And Blake, exhausted by his exertions, sat down by his side and spoke to Pedro, who had been watching him with an intelligence that was little short of human.

"We can go back to England, old chap!" Blake said. "This is Galard. Our work here is over, and we've won!"

. . . .

Fleet Street was full of bustle. The short winter's day was closing in, the yellow rays from the street-lamps were growing prominent, the pavements were slushy, the street was greasy, and motor-'buses, hansom cabs, and other vehicles, were rolling either way. From the hall of the Law Courts men and women were streaming out, barristers, in wig and gown, were crossing to their chambers, solicitors and their clerks were hailing cabs and driving away with arms full of legal papers and models and all the various paraphernalia that is used as evidence in litigation, and the police on duty were waiting the word to file away. A hansom rattled up to the gates and Sexton Blake alighted.

Grouped in the hall was a small party, and a lad sprang forward as Blake's athletic figure came into view.

"We're all here, sir," the lad said. "You're just in time."

"Then wait till I send for you, Tinker," Blake replied. "I must get an audience first."

He tramped on, swinging his cane, and made for the Lord Chancellor's rooms. A man stepped out from an alcove and tapped him sharply on the shoulders.

"Mr. Sexton Blake?" the man said.

"Yes."

"I have a warrant for your arrest! Here it is!"

Blake read the document, and smiled.

"All right," he replied. "What are you going to do?"

"My instructions are to take you directly to the Lord Chancellor."

"Capital! That saves me some bother!" Blake replied. "Lead the way!"

The man gazed oddly at the smiling detective and walked by his side to the Lord Chancellor's private chambers. An usher emerged after a few moments, and his face grew dark as he saw Blake. Without a word he wheeled round, re-entered the Lord Chancellor's sanctum, and, returning quickly, he beckoned to both outside to enter. Blake strode in at once. His face was a trifle stern.

The Lord Chancellor was seated at his desk. He looked at Blake with anger plainly visible on every feature of his keen, intellectual face. And Blake looked at him coldly.

"So you've been arrested at last!" the Lord Chancellor began.

"It seems so, my lord," Blake replied. "I was arrested in the hall when on my way hither. I have come to demand an apology."

The Lord Chancellor's eyes blazed.

"Take heed what you say!" he began. "I am not in the humour to submit to any insolence!"

"Nor am I disposed to submit to indignity for one moment longer than is necessary!" Blake replied quickly. "I claim my right as a British citizen, and as one who has done good service to the State in his time, to that respect and consideration which is the due of every honest man. The insinuations that have been cast upon my honour have been most galling, but I bore with them at the call of duty until such time as the exigencies of justice demanded. I won't put up with them any longer, and I count upon your sense of fair play, my lord, for that reparation to which I am entitled. You either directly, or indirectly, entered into communication with the Swiss authorities, and requested them to apprehend me. Here is a letter from their Minister for Foreign Affairs. You will oblige me if you read it."

Blake handed a letter across the table, and the Lord Chancellor, with a face full of bewilderment, opened it and glanced at the first page. It was a long letter, and as he read page after page, his face grew more and more interested, until at last he was leaning forward, grasping the letter tightly, and uttering exclamations of astonishment every few moments. Finally he dropped it on the table and gazed in silence at the world-renowned detective.

"You said when last I saw you that you were glad you were not altogether dependant on me for information in this case," Blake went on; "and that those who had given you such information as you possessed, were men of highest integrity. You believed them as against me. The solicitors, Datchford & Blobbs, were your informants. Perhaps now you understand why they came to you. You see from that letter that the Swiss Minister thanks me for crushing the most notorious gang of bandits that ever infested his country. You see that the leader Lutzatti is dead, that he fell from a shot meant for me, and fired by the villain Datchford, who is now in a Swiss dungeon. I have also a detailed confession, written out by Blobbs, whom I have just lodged at Bow Street. There it is. I have also captured Galard, who explains his part in this conspiracy. And if you send your usher into the hall with a message to my assistant Tinker to come here, there is yet more that will surprise you."

The Lord Chancellor rose from the table.

"You have asked for an apology, and I give it most wholeheartedly, Mr. Blake," he said, with dignity and intense sincerity. "I was grossly deceived by Datchford & Blobbs, and I realise now, not only that you were right in every step you took, but that also I was most ungenerous in the construction I put upon your conduct. I shall take immediate steps to let the world know your magnificent conduct. Once again I offer you my apologies, and I hope——"

"That is enough on that head, my lord," Blake said, with a smile. "I am quite satisfied now. But if your usher will go to the hall——"

"Quite so. Duckham, call in Mr. Blake's assistant."

The usher opened the door, but he had no need to go farther. He was pushed to one side, and a large bloodhound stalked in, unceremoniously, and crossed over to Blake. The usher uttered a gasp of fear, and a chuckle outside was followed by the entry of Tinker, who gave the frightened official a sharp dig in the ribs as he passed him.

"How do, ole pard?" Tinker inquired. "I guess you're more in your element here than on horseback in Switzerland!"

Bob Benton and Dunstan, the Official Receiver, followed Tinker into the room.

"This is Robert Benton, your ward, my lord," Blake said. "He is none the worst for his adventures."

The Lord Chancellor laid a fatherly hand on the lad's shoulder.

"It is thanks to Mr. Blake that you are safe, my dear boy," he said earnestly. "I hope you will try to grow into as fine a man as him."

"And this is Mr. Dunstan, the Official Receiver in the case of Galard, a bankrupt," Blake went on. "Mr. Dunstan has something of considerable value to show you."

At these words Dunstan extracted a pocket-book, and laid a pile of notes upon the table.

"One hundred thousand pounds! The property of Robert Benton; handed to me by Mr. Blake," Dunstan said. "Count the notes, my lord, and see if the figure is correct."

The Lord Chancellor smiled a trifle drily.

"Everything is quite correct, except my action in the past, I fear," he said. "But Mr. Blake has kindly forgiven that. Gentlemen, I cannot tell you how glad I am to meet you. Let's see. There are one, two—four of you altogether. Duckham, ring up Lady Llanhurst on the telephone and tell her that these gentlemen are dining with me to-night. I am most anxious to get a full account of this wonderful affair, and I hope that you all will favour me with your company."

"With pleasure!" Blake replied.

"Rather!" Tinker chuckled. "You do me proud, my lord!"

THE END.

(If you would like to read other stories dealing with the adventures of Sexton Blake—Detective, and his celebrated Assistants, get a copy of this week's issue of the "Union Jack Library," containing a 40,000-word complete novel. One Penny, of all Newsagents.)

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